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Directors of Dentistry

22 October 2025

Dear Director of Dentistry

As you are aware, in Scotland, we have an almost unique timeline of child oral health statistics, running for almost forty years. The data is gathered by dental teams in schools using the National Dental Inspection Programme (NDIP) and its predecessor system the Scottish Health Boards Dental Epidemiological Programme (SHBDEP). Ministers rely heavily on this dataset in telling the good news story of children's improving oral health in Scotland over this period.

It has been recognised for some time that the NDIP software was standalone, not fully updated or supported. In 2023, the NSS Digital and Security team (DaS) were commissioned to undertake an analysis of the NDIP programme, and it became apparent that the complexities of the programme's functionality meant that a replacement was not straightforward (SBAR enclosed).

It was also discovered that not all Health Boards were using the same version of MS Access, and helpfully, that the three boards that had updated to a newer version had not suffered any data loss or had any issues with the system.

The options proposed on how to proceed, were:

1. Do nothing – Continue with the current process, differing versions of MS Access and maintain the existing risk of system failure;
2. Update MS Access only but retain the remaining programme processes;
3. Update MS Access to mitigate the immediate risk and plan for a new solution.

The NSS team recommended that Option 3 was the preferred way forward. The NSS team also advised that all Health Boards, that had not done so already, should upgrade MS Access to stabilise the programme and mitigate the immediate risk.

In the longer term, NSS would continue its discussions with Scottish Government on

how best to develop an NDIP service that replaces the MS Access system and move to a modern and supported platform. The initial scoping work carried out by NSS DaS has highlighted there are a number of options that should be considered, including the child health system being potentially a good fit, but the feasibility and the suitability of any future option will need assessed fully when funding becomes available.

At this point, funding is not available for this development work and so the ask of Boards is to ensure that you move to a more up to date system specification. Some Boards have already reported moving to MS Access 365 or MS Access 2016 and Windows 10; and NHS GG&C has tested Windows 11 to confirm stability in preparation for future updating. However, some Boards do not seem to have made any progress, and this puts the national oral health dataset and the oral health improvement timeline at risk.

Can I ask that, if you have not been able to achieve progress in your Board to date, you escalate this matter within your health board? Also, please can you ensure that if there is no progress in updating that it is noted on your Boards risk register. Given that this is a dataset that has significant Ministerial interest and Board inaction may compromise the completeness of the dataset, it is important that the risk has visibility.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Yours sincerely



Tom Ferris
Chief Dental Officer

National Dental Inspection Programme (NDIP) SBAR

Situation

The National Dental Inspection Programme (NDIP) are currently using an old MS Access system that is no longer supported and are looking for a replacement.

However, budget and time constraints mean there is no prospect of this being delivered by the end of financial year 2024/25.

The NSS team issued a short-term recommendation on the use of MS Access and how boards should update to a newer version until a new solution can be delivered. NSS has been providing support to the NDIP service where required to facilitate discussions with Health Board eHealth Teams to help progress this interim solution to upgrade their MS Access until funding becomes available.

Background

In May 2023 NSS completed a Demand Analysis for the NDIP replacement and issued an estimate to the programme that it could be delivered for roughly £41k.

Scottish Government made these funds available and NSS DaS were engaged to look at potential options for an NDIP replacement in mid-2024 with aim of delivery by March 2025.

Analysis

Work carried out by the NSS team brought to light a number of complexities that were not apparent from the outset. The main one being the amount of time and manual effort spent in getting data in and out of the NDIP system. Because of this it became apparent a seemingly straightforward removal of MS Access and insertion of a new solution would not be the correct approach.

It was also discovered that not all Health Boards are using the same version of MS Access, and that 3 boards who have updated to a newer version have not suffered any data loss or had any issues with the system that others have experienced.

The NSS team issued a short-term recommendation on the use of MS Access and how boards should update to a newer version until a new solution can be delivered.

The options for a new end to end solution explored by NSS have been split into 3 categories, Data Source, Core Solution, Use of Data.

Sample of Options explored:

Data Source	Core Solution	Use of Data
Child Health System	Develop a solution	Seer
SEEMIS	Child Health System	
	ChildSmile	

To help assess the feasibility of delivering a new solution within the given budget and timeframe NSS have estimated that the cost to develop a new solution is between £50k and £85k taking approximately 6 months.

As this is more than the allocated budget for 2024/25, and with no more money available at present due to the budget constraints, NSS is unable to progress this work further at this time.

Options on how to proceed.

1. Do nothing – Continue with the current process and differing versions of MS Access at Board Level and maintain current risk of system failure.
2. Update MS Access only – Boards to upgrade MS Access but keep remaining processes to mitigate current risk of failure.
3. Update MS Access and plan for a new solution - Mitigate immediate risk and plan for a new solution.

Recommendation

Option 3

Immediate Term

NSS recommend that all Health Boards who have not done so already should progress the recommendation outlined in the Short-term Options paper. This will mitigate the immediate risk that the current system creates.

Longer Term

NSS recommend that the NDIP service replaces the MS Access system and moves to a modern solution. The work carried out by NSS DaS has highlighted there are a number of options that should be considered with Child Health being potentially the right fit, but the feasibility and suitability of any options will need assessed fully when funding becomes available.

30 January 2025