DFT WERO: A Targeted Approach to Strengthening the Rural Dental Workforce in Wales

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Introduction

The Dental Strategic
Workforce Plan
identified gaps in rural
education and training,
causing workforce
shortages and poor
patient access.

The Dental Foundation
Training (DFT)
programme supports
graduates to develop
essential skills while
practicing in NHS
dental services.

Welsh DFT recruitment was historically conducted via the National Recruitment process with England and Northern Ireland.

Rural Welsh practices struggled to attract trainees, leaving 6 rural vacancies unfilled in 2019/20, impacting NHS services.

Associate dentists couldn't take on extra patients, and practice owners faced recruitment issues, limiting NHS access.

In 2023, HEIW
launched the WERO
scheme with incentives
to attract trainees to
rural practices in West,
North, and Central
Wales.

Programme Development

Outline

In the 2023 recruitment cycle, twelve historically hard-to-fill posts were allocated to DFT WERO instead of NRO. This number increased to 15 in 2024, with a further expansion to 16 planned for 2025. Participating practices underwent a rigorous approval process and were supported by experienced Educational Supervisors to ensure high-quality training.

The scheme was strategically promoted to final-year dental students through targeted communication efforts. Applicants applied via a local recruitment process with an application form on Oriel and eligible applicants were invited to interview. Successful candidates were matched to their preferred placements based on interview scores before NRO. To support sustainable retention of these trainees in Wales, the initiative prioritised UK graduates who trained in Wales, are Welsh domiciled, or have an existing connection to Wales.

The WERO Incentives

£7000 Rural Living Grant

Taxable

Initially £5000, but increased to reflect cost of living

MFDS Part 1 Exam
Funding- £535
Payable on completion and submission of a pass certificate

£600 Study Budget

For MFDS exam preparation

Benefits

Access to highquality training materials and facilities.

Early confirmation of

posts in April - 3 months

before NRO offers.

Improvement (QI)
training with
support to complete
and publish projects

Pastoral and wellbeing support, including a Training Programme Director and HEIW's Professional Support Unit

An outstanding weekly study day programme, highly rated by trainees.

The opportunity to live and train in the scenic Welsh countryside.

Proven Strategies

WERO incentives were designed based on successful models like the Dental Recruitment Incentive Scheme (DRIS), Scotland's Recruitment & Retention Allowance, and GP-focused initiatives like the Targeted Enhanced Recruitment Scheme (TERS) in Cumbria.

By combining financial incentives with professional development opportunities and enhanced support systems, WERO aims to attract and retain skilled dentists, ensuring improved access to high-quality care in underserved areas.

Cost

The funding envelope was kept within the DFT budget by using unspent monies associated with unfilled training posts. The WERO Incentive cost to HEIW = £8,135 per training post.

Outcome

Launched in September 2023, the pilot achieved full recruitment and delivered excellent training experiences:

Trainees rated placements positively

Trainees rated their placements as 5/5

Trainees chose to stay in Wales after completion of DFT WERO

Following the scheme's success, it was re-launched in September 2024, with testimonials from the new cohort showcasing outstanding training experiences.

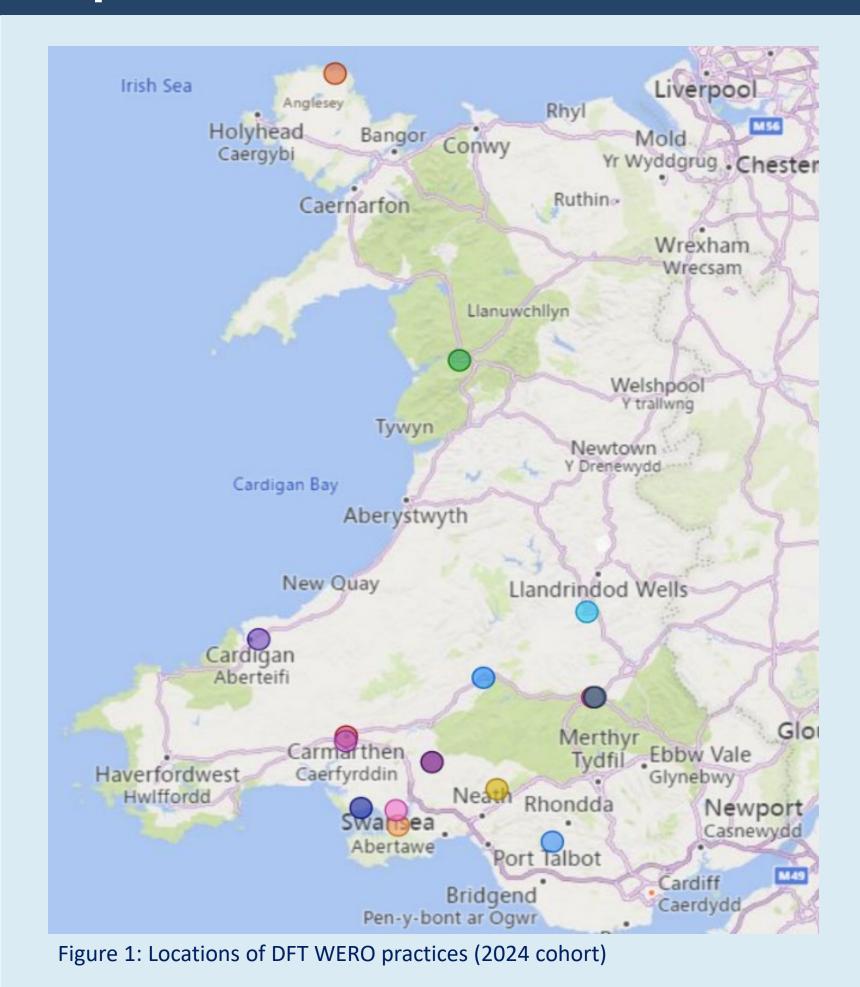
"I applied to the DFT WERO scheme because one of my Liverpool tutors recommended it to me. I'm so thankful I did because I've learned so much... I've gained lots of clinical experience and become a more skilled practitioner. We've taken on more difficult cases, such as complex endodontics or surgical extractions, because secondary care isn't as accessible in rural areas."

"A brilliant and friendly team. The practice was modern, well-equipped, and if I needed anything different, they were more than happy to order it in. My Educational Supervisor was fantastic, always on hand to answer any questions and tailor tutorials to suit my needs."

"A great team to work with and extremely supportive! I've been given lots of training, freedom to learn, and the chance to build confidence in treating patients."

Building on its success, the scheme is set to expand further in September 2025 to 16 posts. There is also potential to introduce two Oral Surgery/Service Delivery posts as a second-year extension (WERO+1), offering a Dental Core Training (DCT) year with one day per week in a specialist practice. This is expected to support the long-term retention of trainees in these rural areas, strengthening workforce stability and enhancing service delivery.

Impact



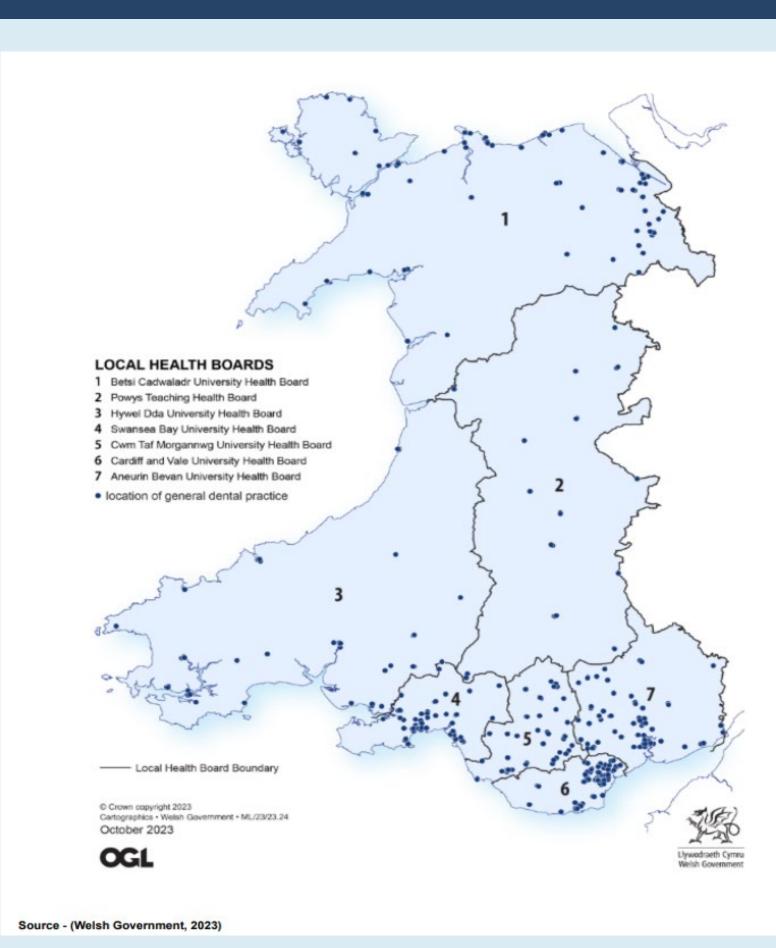


Figure 2: Locations of GDP practices in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023)

The DFT WERO practices are strategically located in regions with already limited NHS dental services, often described as 'dental deserts'. Figure 1 shows the locations of the DFT WERO practices in 2024 while Figure 2 shows the locations of GDP practices in Wales in 2024. By placing trainees in these underserved areas, the initiative has directly improved service delivery, increasing the availability of NHS dental appointments for local communities. This targeted approach not only helps to address the immediate need for dental care but also contributes to reducing long-standing health inequalities.

Rural populations often face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, including long travel distances and a shortage of local providers. By embedding trainees within these communities, DFT WERO ensures more equitable access to essential dental services, promoting better oral health outcomes and supporting the long-term sustainability of NHS dentistry in remote areas.

Conclusion

DFT WERO has successfully addressed recruitment challenges in rural Welsh practices, enhancing quality of training and workforce retention.

By offering targeted incentives, WERO has attracted trainees to underserved areas while supporting their professional development and rura experience.

This strategic approach effectively addressed workforce shortages, aligning trainee growth with local community needs and improving patient access to care

As a result, WERO helps reduce health inequalities and strengthens the longterm stability of the rural dental workforce

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