Election 2026
Parties Oral Health Priorities
In response to NZDA's Questions | **Matrix**

How do the parties line up on oral health?

The New Zealand Dental Association asked political parties five questions about oral health. This matrix summarises how directly Labour, the Opportunity Party, Te Pāti Māori, the Greens, New Zealand First and National addressed each issue. It is a factual comparison of their responses, not an endorsement or ranking. ACT did not provide a response. The responses below are in the order in which the parties responded to NZDA.

Party responses to NZDA oral health policy questions

Party	Oral health as a national priority	Improving access to care	Strengthening prevention	Building the oral health workforce	Long-term reform
Labour	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Recognises oral health's impact on overall health and avoidable child hospitalisations.	**PARTLY ADDRESSED** Proposes broader household and healthcare cost relief, but no specific dental access measure.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports fluoridation direction, smokefree policies, quit-vaping support and alcohol harm reduction.	**PARTLY ADDRESSED** Supports long-term workforce planning and collaboration, but provides few dental-specific commitments.	**PARTLY ADDRESSED** Emphasises prevention and workforce development, but gives limited detail on broader oral health reform.
Opportunity Party	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Would integrate dental care into a ten-year plan and increased first-level care funding.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes staged public funding for basic care, prioritising low-income adults and underserved communities.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports fluoridation, nutrition standards, school lunches and smokefree measures.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes funded ten-year projections, training growth, overseas registration and rural retention.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes long-term funding, prevention and phased expansion of community oral health services.
Te Pāti Māori	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Calls for a greater role for oral health and action on unmet Māori dental needs.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes free dental care for everyone, plus mobile and marae-based services.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports healthier kai, smokefree measures, marketing restrictions and a sugary drink tax.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes $1 billion annually for health workforce development, including oral health, and Māori training.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports integrated data, Māori governance, oral health research and re-establishing Te Aka Whai Ora.
Green Party	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports free dental and primary care, including by-Māori for-Māori community clinics.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes dental vans for rural access and increased funding for Māori and Pasifika dental workforce.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports water fluoridation and policies to make nutritious food more affordable.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports more government-funded dental student places and mobile clinics for underserved areas.	**PARTLY ADDRESSED** Endorses evidence-based prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive care, without detailed implementation measures.
New Zealand First	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Identifies oral health as essential primary care and proposes national priority for early intervention and public check-ups.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes free annual dental check-ups and x-rays for 18–25-year-olds, Community Services Card and SuperGold Card holders.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Prioritises early screening, existing free child dental care, community health literacy and expanded annual check-ups.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Proposes priority visa settings, more training places, student loan abatement and voluntary rural bonding schemes.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports targeted investment, regional health hubs and shifting administrative spending towards frontline dental services.
National Party	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Supports prevention, workforce growth and targeted financial support to improve oral healthcare.	**PARTLY ADDRESSED** Announces 12 more funded dental student places from 2027, but limited measures addressing immediate cost barriers.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Highlights free dental care for under-18s, toothbrush and toothpaste distribution, and support for essential treatment.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Will increase funded dental training places from 60 to 72 annually, including placements for rural-background students.	**EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED** Cites targeted child dental initiatives, a sedation pilot, mobile services and dental facility upgrades.

Key: Explicitly addressed = directly responds to the NZDA question. Partly addressed = discusses the issue but provides limited dental-specific detail.

What the responses reveal

All six parties recognise the importance of prevention and oral health. Their access proposals differ: Labour emphasises wider affordability measures, Opportunity proposes staged publicly funded dental care, Te Pāti Māori proposes free dental care for everyone, the Greens support free dental and primary care, New Zealand First proposes free annual check-ups and x-rays for specified groups, while National emphasises workforce growth and targeted child dental services. The level of detail on dental-specific workforce measures and long-term delivery also varies.

This summary reflects the parties' written responses to NZDA, not necessarily their final election policies. New Zealand First notes that several policies have yet to be finalised and its answers may not form part of its 2026 election manifesto.

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Labour Party – response to NZDA policy questions

1. Oral health as a national priority

Oral disease remains one of New Zealand's most common and costly health conditions, yet oral health has historically received relatively limited policy attention. What role does your Party believe oral health should play within New Zealand's health system over the next parliamentary term, and why?

We know how important oral health is for people's overall health and that delayed dental care for children and young people leads to worse oral health outcomes and often leaves them needing more intensive treatments later in life.

We are concerned that lack of dental care is one of the most common reasons for children's admission to hospitals, and that dental disease is a leading cause of potentially avoidable hospitalisations for young children.

Labour is committed to turning around the issues facing our health system by focusing on prevention and improving access to affordable care in the community.

2. Improving access to care

Many New Zealanders delay or forgo dental treatment because of cost, location or other barriers. What practical steps would your Party take to improve access to timely, affordable oral health care, particularly for those with the greatest need?

Health costs have soared under National, with the cost of a doctor's visit rising 20%, and costs for ambulances, scans, x-rays and prescriptions rising.

We will provide every New Zealander with three free doctor's visits, free prescriptions, free maternity scans and free cervical screening. We have a plan to lower household bills for transport, power, groceries – easing the pressure so people have more left at the end of the week for essentials, such as healthcare.

3. Strengthening prevention

The NZDA believes preventing oral disease should be a cornerstone of public health policy. What preventive measures would your Party prioritise to improve oral health outcomes, and how would these fit within your wider approach to health promotion and disease prevention?

Prevention and early intervention are at the heart of Labour's health policy. We support the Director-General of Health having the authority to direct community water fluoridation. We have committed to bringing back strong Smokefree Generation policies, establishing a dedicated quit vaping service, and expanding Health NZ's alcohol buyout for sports clubs.

4. Building the oral health workforce

Many communities experience difficulty accessing dental services because of workforce shortages and uneven distribution of practitioners. How would your Party ensure New Zealand has the oral health workforce required to meet future demand?

Labour is committed to long-term transparent workforce planning. We are interested in working alongside to understand how we can best support the workforce to improve access and meet demand.

5. Delivering long-term reform

The *NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders* proposes a long-term, evidence-based approach to improving oral health through prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery. Which elements of this approach most closely align with your Party's thinking, and what would be your priorities for reform if elected?

Labour recognises the need to grow the pipeline of oral health professionals in order to meet New Zealand's oral healthcare needs. This will require long-term workforce planning, funding, and collaboration with tertiary institutions and the professional bodies.

We are serious about prevention, in order to keep New Zealanders well and turn around the issues facing our health system.

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Opportunity Party – response to NZDA policy questions

1. Oral health as a national priority

Oral disease remains one of New Zealand's most common and costly health conditions, yet oral health has historically received relatively limited policy attention. What role does your Party believe oral health should play within New Zealand's health system over the next parliamentary term, and why?

Oral health should be treated as part of the health system rather than adjacent to it. Tooth decay is New Zealand's most common chronic disease, yet public support largely ends at 18.

Our Healthy People policy puts health on a ten-year cross-party plan, with increasing funding. It lifts first-level care from 5.7 to 10 per cent of Health New Zealand's spending. Dental care is one of the services inside that envelope. A staged expansion matched to workforce growth cannot be delivered within a three-year cycle, which is why it keeps being announced, partially funded, and then dropped.

2. Improving access to care

What practical steps would your Party take to improve access to timely, affordable oral health care, particularly for those with the greatest need?

We support a staged expansion of publicly funded basic dental care, beginning with those facing the greatest barriers and sequenced against workforce capacity. A fully universal adult scheme is not affordable inside our envelope. But we commit growing health investment and first-level care's share within it, so each Budget isn't a fight just to get enough to stand still.

Our priorities are continuity of care after 18, basic and urgent treatment for adults on low incomes, community, mobile and kaupapa Māori services, and hospital dental capacity for people with complex needs. Cost is the binding barrier - 43 per cent of adults did not see a dentist because of cost in 2024/25 - but removing it faster than the workforce can absorb, converts a cost barrier into a waiting list.

3. Strengthening prevention

What preventive measures would your Party prioritise to improve oral health outcomes, and how would these fit within your wider approach to health promotion and disease prevention?

Prevention is the organising idea of our platform, not a section within it. Four published commitments bear directly on oral health:

- Legislating Health New Zealand's nutrition standards and extending them to schools and ECE, prisons and aged residential care.
- Commissioning a National Nutrition Survey – the last adult survey was 2008/09.
- Restoring the school lunch programme to its pre-2024 model.
- A credible path back to a smoke-free New Zealand.

We support community water fluoridation. Where a direction has been issued on public-health grounds, the Crown should fund its completion rather than leave it as an unfunded mandate on councils.

Progress relies on sensible, evidence-informed decisions, free from undue industry interference. Our Clean Up Politics policy regulates lobbying and donations. New Zealand ranked second in the world for protecting health policy from tobacco industry interference in 2023, and 53rd in 2025. Unprotected prevention measures do not last long enough to work.

4. Building the oral health workforce

How would your Party ensure New Zealand has the oral health workforce required to meet future demand?

The workforce lacks a planning horizon. Our Plan carries funded ten-year workforce projections across the system, oral health included: training intakes sized against that projection rather than historical baselines, faster and more predictable registration for practitioners trained overseas, and retention and distribution measures for rural and high-needs districts.

In the first years of new primary and community funding, buy-in comes before anything else, and oral health should be in that first tranche. Expanding eligibility ahead of workforce growth produces waiting lists rather than treatment.

5. Delivering long-term reform

The *NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders* proposes a long-term, evidence-based approach to improving oral health through prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery. Which elements of this approach most closely align with your Party's thinking, and what would be your priorities for reform if elected?

Everything we do at Opportunity is informed by long-term thinking, evidence and expertise. Our approach is prevention-first, more investment in first-level service delivery and a future-ready system.

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Te Pāti Māori – response to NZDA policy questions

1. Oral health as a national priority

Oral disease remains one of New Zealand's most common and costly health conditions, yet oral health has historically received relatively limited policy attention. What role does your Party believe oral health should play within New Zealand's health system over the next parliamentary term, and why?

Te Pāti Māori understands the importance of oral health for our people and for all people in Aotearoa. We know that Māori suffer disproportionately poorer oral health outcomes and there is significant unmet dental need in our communities. We also know that poor oral health has flow on impacts on a person's overall health. We believe that oral health should play a larger role within our health system, and we believe that oral health care should be more accessible for all people in Aotearoa.

2. Improving access to care

Many New Zealanders delay or forgo dental treatment because of cost, location, or other barriers. What practical steps would your Party take to improve access to timely, affordable oral health care, particularly for those with the greatest need?

Costs and geography are the biggest barriers to oral healthcare in Aotearoa. Te Pāti Māori will provide free dental care for all people in Aotearoa to address cost barriers and inequities, based on the mahi of Dental for All Aotearoa. We will also invest in mobile health units and Marae-based clinics to ensure that geography isn't a barrier to accessing essential health services, including oral health care.

3. Strengthening prevention

The NZDA believes preventing oral **disease should be a cornerstone of public health policy. What preventive measures would your Party prioritise to improve oral health outcomes, and how would these fit within your wider approach to health promotion and disease prevention?**

Te Pāti Māori will continue to prioritise prevention. We will make healthy kai more affordable for whānau, we will restore smoke free targets and reduce nicotine in tobacco, we will implement a complete ban on alcohol marketing, and we will restrict all unhealthy food and drink marketing targeted at children. We have also long been advocates of a sugary drink tax, and we will continue to support this kaupapa as long as the revenue generated is invested into Māori-led health solutions and prevention.

4. Building the oral health workforce

Many communities experience difficulty accessing dental services because of workforce shortages and uneven distribution of practitioners. How would your Party ensure New Zealand has the oral health workforce required to meet future demand?

Te Pāti Māori will invest $1 billion annually in health workforce development, including the oral health workforce. We will also expand the Māori workforce and training opportunities and ensure that the wellbeing of the Dentist Workforce is prioritised.

5. Delivering long-term reform

The *NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders* proposes a long-term, evidence-based approach to improving oral health through prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery. Which elements of this approach most closely align with your Party's thinking, and what would be your priorities for reform if elected?

As outlined above, Te Pāti Māori is committed to removing access barriers through free and accessible oral healthcare, to strengthening prevention by restoring smokefree targets, promoting healthy kai, and restricting advertising, and to building the oral health workforce. On top of these commitments, we have heard from a number of health stakeholders that data systems need to be improved across the sector. Te Pāti Māori supports the development of integrated health information systems that uphold data sovereignty and lead to better processes and outcomes for patients. We will re-establish Te Aka Whai Ora (The Māori Health Authority) and ensure adequate Māori governance and leadership within the oral health sector. We support continued investment in oral health research, and as with all our policies, we will uphold our role as kaitiakitanga of our whenua, wai, and moana, by ensuring that all mahi is conducted in an environmentally sustainable way.

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Green Party – response to NZDA policy questions

1. Oral health as a national priority

Oral disease remains one of New Zealand's most common and costly health conditions, yet oral health has historically received relatively limited policy attention. What role does your Party believe oral health should play within New Zealand's health system over the next parliamentary term, and why?

The Green Party accepts how importance oral health is, and how difficult it is for many New Zealanders to access care. We will continue to work towards free provision of dental and primary care services, including by-Māori for-Māori community clinics.

2. Improving access to care

Many New Zealanders delay or forgo dental treatment because of cost, location or other barriers. What practical steps would your Party take to improve access to timely, affordable oral health care, particularly for those with the greatest need?

We would look to fund dental vans to ensure rural communities are able to access dental care without having to travel so far, and provide a workforce funding boost, including for Māori and Pasifika dentists, to increase workforce overall.

3. Strengthening prevention

The NZDA believes preventing oral disease should be a cornerstone of public health policy. What preventive measures would your Party prioritise to improve oral health outcomes, and how would these fit within your wider approach to health promotion and disease prevention?

The Green Party would legislate against price gouging and create a new nationally-owned supermarket, KiwiMart, to compete against the existing grocery duopoly to bring prices down, to ensure more New Zealanders can access nutritious kai that support good oral health. We are also supportive of fluoridation in water as a preventative oral health measure.

4. Building the oral health workforce

Many communities experience difficulty accessing dental services because of workforce shortages and uneven distribution of practitioners. How would your Party ensure New Zealand has the oral health workforce required to meet future demand?

The Green Party are supportive of lifting the number of Government-funded dental student positions to account for population growth or further if required. We would also be supportive of further action to address the uneven distribution of practitioners, including through investing in mobile clinics to access underserved communities.

5. Delivering long-term reform

The *NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders* proposes a long-term, evidence-based approach to improving oral health through prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery. Which elements of this approach most closely align with your Party's thinking, and what would be your priorities for reform if elected?

The Green Party is a firm believer in an evidence-based approach to decision making. Prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery are all major focuses of our health policy, including dental, and would all be prioritised if elected.

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New Zealand First – response to NZDA policy questions

Please note as a disclaimer that for a lot of areas, the party has yet to finalize its policies. The questions answered draw inspiration from publicly announced policies for the upcoming elections, party principles and past party policies - which may or may not be part of NZ First Election Manifesto for 2026.

1. Oral health as a national priority

Oral disease remains one of New Zealand's most common and costly health conditions, yet oral health has historically received relatively limited policy attention. What role does your Party believe oral health should play within New Zealand's health system over the next parliamentary term, and why?

New Zealand First treats health as a critical investment in human capital rather than a balance sheet item (Principle 6 of NZ First). We view oral health as an essential component of primary healthcare.

Historically neglected, poor oral health drives preventable chronic disease, places severe pressure on hospital emergency departments, and worsens social inequality.

Over the next parliamentary term, New Zealand First will elevate oral health as a national health priority, focusing on community-based early intervention, expanded public check-ups, and frontline primary care.

2. Improving access to care

Many New Zealanders delay or forgo dental treatment because of cost, location or other barriers. What practical steps would your Party take to improve access to timely, affordable oral health care, particularly for those with the greatest need?

New Zealand First will significantly improve access to affordable oral health care by delivering a free annual dental check-up and x-ray for 18–25 year olds, Community Service Card holders, and SuperGold Card holders.

Delivered through community-based primary care facilities rather than overburdened hospitals, this policy provides practical financial relief to lower-income Kiwis and superannuitants.

By identifying dental decay and oral disease early, we stop preventable suffering, improve overall health literacy, and lower downstream emergency healthcare costs for taxpayers.

3. Strengthening prevention

The NZDA believes preventing oral disease should be a cornerstone of public health policy. What preventive measures would your Party prioritise to improve oral health outcomes, and how would these fit within your wider approach to health promotion and disease prevention?

New Zealand First prioritizes early prevention by maintaining comprehensive free dental coverage for children and teenagers, while expanding free annual check-ups to young adults, low-income earners, and superannuitants.

Prevention is central to our broader strategy of addressing chronic health conditions early. By supporting community health literacy, local public health measures, and regular diagnostic screening, we prevent severe dental disease before it requires expensive hospital intervention, aligning directly with our pragmatic, investment-led approach to national healthcare governance.

4. Building the oral health workforce

Many communities experience difficulty accessing dental services because of workforce shortages and uneven distribution of practitioners. How would your Party ensure New Zealand has the oral health workforce required to meet future demand?

New Zealand First will expand the oral health workforce by prioritizing dentists, dental hygienists, and therapists under Critical Skill visa settings to address immediate regional shortages.

To build long-term domestic capacity, we support expanding university training places, offering student loan abatement, and implementing voluntary bonding schemes for dental graduates who commit to practicing in hard-to-staff regional and rural communities.

This ensures all New Zealanders, regardless of their postcode, have equitable access to qualified, frontline oral health professionals.

5. Delivering long-term reform

The *NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders* proposes a long-term, evidence-based approach to improving oral health through prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery. Which elements of this approach most closely align with your Party's thinking, and what would be your priorities for reform if elected?

New Zealand First strongly aligns with the NZDA Roadmap's emphasis on prevention, targeted public investment, workforce expansion, and locally responsive care.

Our immediate priorities for long-term reform include rolling out free annual check-ups for young adults, seniors, and low-income Kiwis, resourcing regional health hubs, and cutting central health bureaucracy.

By redirecting administrative overheads directly into frontline dental services, we will build a sustainable, community-centred oral health system that delivers equitable care and better health outcomes across NZ.

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National Party – response to NZDA policy questions

1. Oral health as a national priority

Oral disease remains one of New Zealand's most common and costly health conditions, yet oral health has historically received relatively limited policy attention. What role does your Party believe oral health should play within New Zealand's health system over the next parliamentary term, and why?

The National Party believes all New Zealanders should be supported to get the dental treatment they need through a strong focus and emphasis on prevention, workforce growth, targeted support and financial support.

2. Improving access to care

Many New Zealanders delay or forgo dental treatment because of cost, location or other barriers. What practical steps would your Party take to improve access to timely, affordable oral health care, particularly for those with the greatest need?

The National Party have announced we will grow the dental workforce, so that New Zealanders can get timely access quality dental care.

Beginning in 2027, we'll fund an additional 12 domestic student places in the University of Otago's Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme, taking the number of government-funded places from 60 to 72 a year.

This will be the first increase in funded dental places in more than a decade, representing a significant investment to help meet growing demand.

Under a National government, more dentists will be trained, so that New Zealanders receive faster access to quality oral healthcare.

3. Strengthening prevention

The NZDA believes preventing oral disease should be a cornerstone of public health policy. What preventive measures would your Party prioritise to improve oral health outcomes, and how would these fit within your wider approach to health promotion and disease prevention?

The National Party have a strong focus and emphasis on prevention. Free dental services are available for all children and young people up to their 18th birthday, helping them build strong oral health habits from an early age.

More than three million toothbrushes and toothpaste packs have also been provided to preschoolers most at risk, supporting families to establish healthy routines from the very beginning.

Financial support is also available for some adults to cover essential and emergency dental treatment.

4. Building the oral health workforce

Many communities experience difficulty accessing dental services because of workforce shortages and uneven distribution of practitioners. How would your Party ensure New Zealand has the oral health workforce required to meet future demand?

Rural communities are particularly impacted by workforce shortages, which is why the National Party have announced we will grow the dental workforce, so that New Zealanders can get timely access quality dental care. This includes dedicated placements for students from rural backgrounds.

National are committed to continuing to find ways to grow the oral health workforce.

5. Delivering long-term reform

The *NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders* proposes a long-term, evidence-based approach to improving oral health through prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive service delivery. Which elements of this approach most closely align with your Party's thinking, and what would be your priorities for reform if elected?

Prevention, targeted investment, workforce growth and locally responsive services are all focus areas for the National Party.

The National Party have a strong focus and emphasis on prevention.

A range of targeted investments have helped significantly reduce, for example, the Auckland dental surgery waitlist, including providing additional support for families, more weekday and Saturday theatre capacity, and closer collaboration between hospital and community oral health teams.

A publicly funded pilot offering sedation for dental treatment has been launched, giving children aged five and over who might otherwise need treatment under general anaesthetic in hospital an alternative option.

National wants to set children up early for a healthy future, which is why locally targeted initiatives that expand dental services and bring community care closer to home are so important.

A new mobile dental clinic in South Auckland is improving access to dental care for the local community, providing assessments, treatment and oral health education for up to 3,000 children each year.

Regarding workforce, National is increasing funded dentistry training places for the first time in more than a decade, as part of its plan to build a stronger health workforce. Training more dentists means New Zealanders will get faster access to quality dental care.

National are also committed to delivering modern, fit-for-purpose health facilities that improve access to care.

The upgrade of Whanganui's dental unit is another example of our focus on ensuring patients receive care in the right setting, with the modernised facility enabling staff to deliver care more efficiently and safely.