

What we're hearing about Dentistry: In the last 6 Months (August 2020 - January 2021)

One of the statutory duties of Healthwatch Surrey is to listen to the views of local people about their health and social care and to share these views with the organisations who make decisions about local services. We share this insight, much of it in people's own words, in the hope that it can be used by commissioners and providers to develop services going forward. We are aware that people may have specific reasons for sharing with Healthwatch as an independent organisation and may be more motivated to share more negative than positive feedback, however we hope that this insight can be combined and triangulated with other sources of feedback to provide a fuller picture of people's experience of local services.

All appropriate information and advice, and signposting to sources of help and provider complaints process, has already been given by us and our partners. All case studies have given consent to share.

Healthwatch Surrey has gathered these experiences through people contacting us directly, via our Citizens Advice partners, and our Independent Health Complaints Advocacy service.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen a marked increase in enquiries about dentistry. We have heard from 60 individuals about dentistry, August 2020-December 2020 vs 10 individuals in the same time period last year. Healthwatch England published a report in December 2020 about access to dentistry during the pandemic:

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/2020-12-09/covid-19-pandemic-pushes-nhs-dentistry-crisis-point-finds-new-report>

In February 2021, Healthwatch England published an update to this report, which was widely shared in the media.

In a follow-up review of people's feedback on dentistry, we looked at a further 1,129 people's experiences of accessing dental care, received between October and December 2020.

We found:

- Access to dentistry remained difficult for more than seven in 10 people (72%).
- Some people who actively sought dental treatment were told they would have to wait anywhere between a few months to, in one case, two years for an appointment.
- Access to urgent NHS treatment was difficult for both people with painful teeth, with patients being told that dental pain was not considered an "emergency", and those who were prescribed multiple courses of antibiotics by NHS111 without being provided any further treatment.
- Some people said they had called over 40 practices to find an NHS dentist, and pulled their own teeth out when they couldn't bear the pain.
- When dentists couldn't offer an appointment, they advised people to buy dental repair kits to treat themselves. In one case, an individual was advised to use a nail file to deal with the sharp edges of a broken tooth.

Prioritising volume over need.

In more recent developments, The British Dental Association has issued an open letter to Health Secretary Matt Hancock following the revelations exposed by the BBC on 29th January 2021 that a leading UK dental chain has instructed dentists to limit urgent care, in order to meet "unrealistic" targets imposed by government on NHS dental providers on 1 January 2021.

<https://www.bda.org/advice/Coronavirus/Documents/letter-to-matt-hancock-bbc-investigation-imposed-targets-29-jan-2021.pdf>

<https://www.bda.org/news-centre/press-releases/dentists-lockdown-targets-leave-patients-in-pain-without-options>

Healthwatch England's response:

"Routine appointments are important to maintain good oral health, but prioritising these at the expense of treating those in need of more complex care to meet targets is simply wrong. Untreated dental problems can lead to infections and increase the risk of long-term harm like oral cancers".

Most of Healthwatch Surrey's dentistry experiences have come through our Helpdesk, local Citizens Advice and our website. Other experiences have come through virtual engagement events which our engagement officers have joined with specialist groups (e.g. cancer patients, dementia carers and parents of special needs children).

A key factor in the growth of enquiries to us was due to the NHS website advising people who were struggling to find a dentist to contact their local Healthwatch.

<https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/how-to-find-an-nhs-dentist/>

If after contacting several dental surgeries you still cannot find a dentist accepting NHS patients, call NHS England's Customer Contact Centre on 0300 311 2233. NHS England commissions dental services in England and is required to meet the needs of their local population for both urgent and routine dental care. Your local Healthwatch also may be able to give you information about services in your area. [Find your local Healthwatch](#)

Key themes we are hearing:

- Difficulty in finding NHS dentists taking new patients
- Availability of NHS dental appointments for existing patients*
- Lack of communication about access during COVID
- Practices opening for private appointments (e.g. Hygienist) but not routine NHS appointments
- Payment/ charges
- Specialist dementia care

Unsurprisingly, the main enquiry has been about finding a NHS dentist for a new patient. We have seen this issue across the whole county:

*I am struggling to find an NHS dentist in the Woking area, according to the NHS website it said the best thing to do in such case was contact Healthwatch Surrey. Do you have any idea who is taking on NHS patients in the area? **124994, August 2020***

*My partner and I have been trying to look for a local NHS dentist and are struggling to find anything. We live in Dorking Surrey and really need to have an appointment. I was hoping you could tell us of the closest NHS dental practice to us that's currently taking on new patients. **124996, August 2020***

Hello, I am reporting that I am struggling to find a dental service that are taking on new NHS patients. I have called almost every service that is local (even up to 40/50minute drive) that takes NHS patients and have found that nowhere are taking new patients on a waiting list or anything. I am unsure as to what I should do. I'm 21 years old and have recently had to go and have a private assessment done which cost me nearly £100 just to check the condition of my mouth. I have now found that I need £748 worth of fillings, I need to see a specialist for a failed root canal costing upwards of £900, I also need to get two crowns done costing a starting price of £550 each. I obviously don't have this type of money and am stressed about where I shall go next. Any suggestions would be appreciated. Many thanks, **135533, December 2020**

Hi, I'm struggling to find an NHS dentist and I'm struggling with wisdom tooth pain. Dentists have said they can help with pain relief as an emergency but can't take me on as a new patient and fixing the problem (+ it's a repeated issue) has to be done at another practice that's taking new NHS patients. If you can help I will be so grateful. Thank you, **139248, January 2021**

We have also heard about existing patients struggling to get NHS appointments

*Client has been suffering from tooth ache for over 3 weeks. Her usual NHS dentist is not able to give her an appointment, she phoned alternative dentists but none of them take NHS clients. She is unable to pay privately for this service and asked for assistance as to who to contact. **131865, October 2020***

*I'm a housebound person for many years due to serious chronic health issues. In June I Broke a molar tooth at the gumline because of hardened grain in Special K cereal. Called my dentist to ask for advice and see if they are accepting patients. Said yes they are open and operating, but not for NHS patients. Just for private ones! Gutted. I suffer with TMJ and this will no doubt affect me longer than it should. Aside from the fact I'm certain it's not what the government intended to happen. Discriminate. **HWE, November 2020***

*Client unfortunately lost teeth the day before lockdown in March. Client has been left with no teeth for a number of months which obviously causes lots of complications. Client contacted their dentist multiple times during lockdown, only to be informed that they were only offering private dental work, which was not something the client was able to afford, client was told they should try finding another dentist who would provide NHS work. Over the past few weeks client's dentist has now resumed NHS work and client has now been booked in to start required dental work. Unfortunately, the client has been waiting a long time. Client would like to see dentists provide emergency NHS dental work through another lockdown as not everyone can pay for private work, at least provide a list of dentists that are providing treatment for NHS patients. **132967, October 2020***

The reality is that dental patients are not registered to a specific dental surgery, in the same way as they are with a GP practice. It seems that awareness of this is low, so 'existing patients' believe that they are entitled to treatment at a dental surgery which treated them previously.

On the other hand, a dental practice cannot de-register someone, but often people who have had a long gap since their last appointment are told they have been, when really what the dental practice means is that there are no available NHS appointments.

We've heard about a lack of communication from dentists to patients during the pandemic - appointments are being cancelled, but new appointments are not being offered subsequently.

*We don't need any surgery but we both need to see the dentist, but it will be a while before we can see a dentist. I'm a diabetic so it's important I see someone. I had an appointment in May, but it was cancelled, and I've not heard back from the dentist [Smile in Woking] to give me another appointment. **124201, August 2020***

*In terms of dentists, I'm on the books in the [named]. Again, I've never had anything drastic done but the care has always been fine even though the receptionists can be a bit grumpy. But we haven't been in ages because of the virus. I have no idea when services will resume but I was saying to my wife: if we had a dental emergency, what would we do? **126049, September 2020***

My dentist's website says they are open and to call to make an appointment. When I called, I was told that they cannot do routine check-ups and have no idea when they will start again. I have a

daughter who is very anxious about her teeth who is about to go back to University. I am annoyed because their website is misleading and because there has been no communication from my dentist about what is happening and when we might be able to see them again. I know these are challenging times, but I would prefer some honesty and some proper communication. HWE, August 2020

The NHS website states that: -

Once you find a dental surgery, you may have to fill in a registration form at your first visit, which is just to add you to their patient database. However, that does not mean you have guaranteed access to an NHS dental appointment in the future.

There is some awareness of this, but we are hearing from people saying that they are waiting to hear from the dentist. This is in line with the same stoical attitude of patients regarding other NHS appointments. People are reluctant to 'bother' healthcare professionals with their needs; the assumption is that the NHS will be there for them when they really need them in an emergency. However, the same model is not in place for dentistry. It would be interesting to explore this further.

My wisdom tooth broke and it was really painful. I rang my dentist [Horley & Gatwick Dental Practice] who told me the nearest appointment was not until September. I was in a lot of pain so went to the emergency department at East Surrey Hospital. They gave me antibiotics and pain killers. The pain has gone now so I'm OK waiting until mid-September for my appointment. Also, I am an NHS patient at the dentist and you have to go regularly, every 6 months, to stay registered as an NHS patient, but due to COVID and the surgery not seeing patients and also the backlog they've had due to COVID, I went beyond that 6 month period through no fault of mine but they still told me I had to re-register! 123761, July 2020

I needed an emergency dental appointment as a filling came out about 2-3 months ago, just before the easing of restrictions. I rang, explained and someone rang me back. I spoke to one of the dentists and they told me to come in. [Bourne Hall dental practice] I have to say I was really quite impressed as it was really easy to speak to and see someone. But I really don't know what is happening about routine appointments. It's been a year since I last had a routine check, but I've had no communication. My next one was due during COVID but I've not enquired about it. Actually, I have been reluctant to go because of COVID. 131045, October 2020

I phoned in September to ask when they would be able to offer check-ups as mine was cancelled because of Covid. I was told they aren't booking any check-ups at the moment and to check back in a few months or keep an eye on their website. I am concerned at the lack of dentistry in this area. 128116, September 2020

Waiting times

Client had a broken tooth and has been unable to find a dentist in the Camberley area who will take client on as an NHS patient. The closest offer of an appointment is to be added to a waiting list and get a possible appointment next year with [named dentist]. Client has tried 13 dentists so far. 135911, November 2020

Temporary repairs

*Amazing dentist. Lost filling in lockdown 1 and it took half my tooth with it. My dentist was closed but called and explained and she asked which tooth so she could go and look at the x-rays she had. She researched a temporary repair kit which I ordered and used. Then when they opened, she called to arrange one of the first appointments to fix it further and make an appointment first thing so I could not be near people as she knew I was shielding and anxious. I have been fearful of dentists for 20 years. I've now got to go back later today as have infection and she said if I wait to go to hospital it will take over a year, but she could remove it in the surgery. I'm so anxious about it but she has made me feel safe and reassured me. **138769, January 2021***

Practices opening for private appointments (e.g. Hygienist) but not routine NHS appointments.

Both mine and my children's routine NHS Dental appointments have been cancelled via text and email during Covid and we were contacted well in advance of the dates in May and End July. The message said appointments are cancelled but they will be in touch at a later date to rebook and to contact the practice if you have any dental issues in the meantime. I also visit the hygienist at the practice, and this is a private service which requires a deposit and two days' notice to cancel the appointment. I was surprised to receive a confirmation text message from the dentist at 4pm to say my appointment would be going ahead the next morning. I called the reception team to query the appointment and to ask if my son's appointment would be going ahead too? They clarified to say it was in fact my Hygienist appointment.

*I thought the clinic was only open for emergency dental treatment only and I was unable to arrange last minute childcare to attend. Luckily, they were happy to rebook the hygienist appointment for October and waive the penalty which I would have usually incurred if I had cancelled at the last moment. I queried when our dental appointments would be rescheduled and was told they would contact you and will be starting call backs to NHS patients from 'August'. The reception team were very helpful and practical, but it could have been made clearer in their messages to patients that they had opened for routine private appointments even though they had not resumed routine appointments for NHS patients. I notice that they mentioned their Facebook page as a source of information in one of the email messages but for those who don't use social media, it would be helpful if any updates also go out via other means. **124519, August 2020***

We have heard about issues with cash payments no longer being accepted. We have also heard about confusion regarding charges, including PPE.

*"My brother has been told he cannot access dental treatment unless he stops paying in cash. My brother pays for everything in cash. The only exception is when he goes to the bank to get them to (a) withdraw cash for him or (b) pay a bill for him. I realise there is a lot to organise for Covid at the moment. But please would you consult with your health colleagues and their support/IT staff to ensure vulnerable people who do not use credit/debit cards can continue to access dental care. I look forward to telling my brother about your response. **131767, October 2020***

*Hi, I went to Clareville Dental Surgery for my dental check-up they said I need to do scaling and polishing of my teeth and I have to take treatment from hygienist. I am NHS patient so am I eligible to take this treatment under NHS? The dentist were saying that your gums are swollen you need to clean your teeth and the hygienist will do this and you have to pay privately, if you don't do this you may lose your tooth. So this is clinically needed? **124993, August 2020***

*[A gentleman] has been charged for dental treatment and was looking for confirmation that he is actually entitled to free NHS treatment as he is currently receiving Universal Credit but was charged by dentist. **126969, September 2020***

Charges for PPE

*I had to go to the dentist last week. Had temperature check and wore a mask. I was only one there and had to come in a set agreed time. I was surprised to find I was charged for extra PPE?! I also have had 3 hospital appointments cancelled by telephone. I usually get heart monitor checks but now these are not being done. **124561, August 2020***

Through our engagement events, we've heard mixed experiences regarding specialist dementia care dentistry.

*They prescribe Duraphat toothpaste privately. They've been very good and understanding of the issues involved in looking after J's teeth. They were quicker off the mark setting up a post-COVID appointment for wife than for me. They were fantastic. **125205, August 2020***

*In November '19, we visited the dentist [named]. We had a brilliant NHS dentist and she moved to purely private work. The new person was awful. I don't know why I didn't complain. He didn't take into account [my husband's] dementia. He refused to give us a special toothpaste saying he didn't need it. People with dementia have a real likeness for sweet food and a previous dentist had prescribed Duraphat, 6 tubes each time which last a long time. It's another prevention against sweet food rotting teeth. **125214, August 2020***