

# Experiences of Dental Access

## January-May 2021

Between January-May 2021, we have heard from 72 people about their experiences of accessing and receiving dental treatment. This report has been grouped into themes arising from insight shared with Healthwatch Surrey and contain some examples of each theme.

54 out of 63 people who have contacted our helpdesk have been looking for dentists accepting NHS patients:

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*"I am not able to find a dentist providing new NHS check-up appointments in my area. I have called over 20 dental surgeries. I do need a check-up ASAP. Please can you help me find a dental surgery accepting new NHS patients?" **141543, March 2021***

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People are also looking for NHS dentists for their children:

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*"I recently enquired about registering my 2 year old daughter as a patient and was told that was not possible although the child could be registered privately.... the dentist has just said that they are not taking on any more NHS patients at this time." **141418 March 2021***

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According to the NHS's "A Little Trip to the Dentist Campaign Toolkit", "By the age of five many children could already have tooth decay, many of whom may only have been to the dentist when they are in pain or the decay is already so severe they need to have teeth removed. We want parents and carers to take their babies to the dentist sooner rather than later, even before their first teeth come through." This shows the importance of having access to dental care for children.

The information people have found elsewhere has sometimes been incorrect:

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*"I tried the NHS Find a Dentist site but found that the dentists quoted on that site were not taking NHS patients." **133203, May 2021***

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*"I am trying to find an NHS dentist in my area that is taking on new adult patients. I have contacted a lot of the ones that are on the NHS website but they all say they aren't taking on new patients." **140380, February 2021***

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*"It seems that most dentists will happily put on their website that they are accepting new patients but not actually be willing to when you contact them." **133206, April 2021***

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*"I searched on the internet local NHS dentist and all I've tried to contact gave me the same answer... not accepting new NHS patients but they are accepting new patient on a private basis." **144606, May 2021***

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*"Tried to get emergency appointment by calling 111 but just given numbers of two practices, both of which could only offer private appointments even though the 111 nurse insisted they were listed as offering emergency appointments to NHS patients. I only discovered, after Google search, that ESH does weekend appointments through the 111 service... Also, there's no up to date info on dentists accepting NHS patients, since the online search only lists practices in my area, not further afield. I desperately need a dentist but calling 111 gets me nowhere. This whole area is one that needs reviewing, not all emergencies are covid related."* **141537, March 2021**

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## Many of the people trying to access treatment are in pain:

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*"I am struggling to find a dentist. I have broken teeth and possibly an abscess so need to see someone soon but have no money for private treatment."* **103384134, March 2021**

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*"I am looking for an NHS Dentist for my husband. He is unable to sleep properly due to toothache."* **144314, May 2021**

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*"I have a cracked molar needing treatment. I have called many dentists but unable to find any taking NHS patients."* **144603, May 2021**

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*"I am having a lot of problems with some of my teeth, especially recently where a filling has broken, and I need to see a dentist. However, I cannot find any that accept NHS patients in my local area and cannot afford to pay privately."* **144611, May 2021**

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*"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."* **139248, January 2021**

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*"I have problems with old fillings and slight toothache and despite recent requests for an appointment I have not been offered one."* **144141, April 2021**

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*"Back in November 2020, I started suffering with a painful bad tooth. [My dentist told me] that I would have to wait until April 2021 for an NHS appointment."* **141101, February 2021**

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## People with exemptions have also struggled to get access to NHS treatment:

According to NHS.uk, "pregnant women are encouraged to keep up with their regular dental appointments as well, as often the hormonal changes a woman goes through can result in an increased risk of gum disease or other issues." However, people have told us of their experiences where this has not been possible.

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*"I have been unable to find a dentist in my area taking on new NHS patients (I have a maternity exemption certificate). I have a broken tooth that is painful when I eat or drink, and would like to get it sorted. I'd be grateful if you could advise of a dentist in my area which is actually willing to take NHS patients with exemptions."* **133206, April 2021**

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*"I have the right to have free dentist [treatment] on the NHS because [I have an exemption certificate] and now I can't find a place to go and I will need to pay [for a] private dentist."* **144606, May 2021**

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*"I am looking for an NHS dentist for more than 8 months and nobody is taking me. I can't afford private as I just gave birth and not working. I have some dental issues that need to be fixed."* **138939, January 2021**

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*"...since becoming pregnant I have been making efforts over the last 4 months to find a local dentist taking on NHS patients, but have had no luck. I don't have any immediate dental concerns, but I do also understand how important it is to have dental checkups during pregnancy, so I am really keen to get booked in somewhere."* **140998, February 2021**

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*"I'm pregnant and have an exemption form and would like a dental check-up before I have my baby. None of the dentists in [my area] appear to be taking new NHS patients. My old private dentist is in London near work, which I haven't been to for over a year. And don't want to travel due to COVID."* **141004, February 2021**

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People with low incomes have also struggled to access treatment:

*"As I haven't been to my dentist since March 2019, they said I need to re-register, for this they charge £45. I am an NHS patient who is also entitled to help with dentist costs as I am on universal credit. I have developed a gum issue and was told I cannot receive NHS treatment until I have re-registered and paid the £45."* **138944, January 2021**

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*"I want to register with [a] dentist, who accepts NHS services because I receive Universal Credit financial aid, and I can't afford the cost of dental interventions."* **140674, February 2021**

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People have had appointments cancelled and have not been able to reschedule:

*"My NHS appointment was cancelled last March [2020] and despite recent requests for an appointment I have not been offered one."* **144141, April 2021**

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*"I have had my NHS appointment cancelled 4 times in the last year. It's been well over a year since I had a check-up. The most recent was cancelled and when I enquired as to why they said that NHS England has limited capacity so despite having capacity to see people they are unable to: '...our NHS service provision has been restricted to 45% of our usual activity by NHS-England and as such we have been asked to prioritise our appointment book as follows: 1) Patients requiring Urgent and Emergency treatment 2) Patients part way through a dental treatment plan 3) Check-ups for patients who have been advised to visit their dentist every 3 months because of high oral disease risk 4) Patients who are classed as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (Shielding) 5) Check-ups for children (18 years & below).' I was however offered the option to join the Denplan and pay £18.99 to be seen privately however that would lose my place as an NHS patient. It seems ridiculous that a) the dentist can't see people if they have capacity and b) the fact they can see people who pay! This isn't a criticism of the dentist practice as they are communicating well more a frustration at why the NHS Restrictions are in place if they could be seeing patients. Thankfully they are prioritising children and emergencies but the routine check ups are so important for preventing things getting to an emergency appointment!"* **140999, February 2021**

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*Myself and my husband were registered with a Dentist as NHS patients. We have been removed from their register as they say we have not been for a check-up. The practice has been closed due to lockdown. I cannot find another Dentist in my area that is taking NHS patients and cannot afford to go private. What do I do?"* **141528, March 2021**

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## Families and carers of vulnerable people have shared their experiences:

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*"I have been desperately trying to get an NHS dentist. My son, who has learning disabilities, had to have a tooth removed. I had to pay private as I had no other option as his tooth was causing him huge distress." I cannot afford to pay for private and feel it's quite wrong NHS dentists don't have space yet will see you that day if you have money to give them. I found this very saddening that they happily take £500 for a tooth to be removed privately. I am desperate to find an NHS dentist who will take myself and my son. I cannot afford to pay private and my son needs regular checkups. Can you please kindly find an nhs dentist for us as I just get the same response 'sorry we are not taking on new NHS patients'."* **144183, April 2021**

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*"The dental surgeon ignored the Best Interest Dental operation order and removed my severely autistic son's front canine tooth.... He has a gaping hole there now and she didn't even stitch it because she said she thought the stitch would 'aggravate his autism sensory issues', so he has been bleeding a lot. He is in acute distress and is traumatized. It took me months alongside his regular dentist and orthodontist to prepare him for the procedure so he wouldn't be overwhelmed or stressed. This has been in the works for over a year. I was just outside the operating theatre. The dental surgeon never once attempted to get decision from any one of us three involved in the Best Interest Decision to change the order, violating the Mental Capacity Act at the very least. It has been a nightmare today. And, as my son has extremely limited communication and understanding, this will likely affect any future needs for hospital or dental care. The dental surgeon left immediately, and I had to wait for her to call me back to find out what happened. I begged her to reset it, but she said it was too late. She called back and did apologize and said it would take months/years and several more operations to fill the space with a bridge due to his special needs. I'm just devastated. My son was under so much distress that as soon as he started to wake up he started screaming 'I'm sorry.' Just breaks my heart. He thinks he did something and is being punished."* **144322, April 2021**

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*"I am a carer and need to find NHS dental treatment for my client who has significant mental health issues and needs some serious dental health treatment. He has very poor oral health as a result of a fear of dentists. He has been assisted by [an acute hospital] in the past. I have rung several dentists but been refused treatment."* **140729, February 2021**

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*"The dentist was good and they were very supportive of mum's needs. It was the first time we had been so didn't think to make a next appointment and no one prompted us to. Now mum hasn't seen a dentist for over a year (partly I'm sure because of Covid) but I don't know if they're making appointments or if I need to prompt. As a person I don't like to bother people and there's no emergency but as a carer, responsible for someone else's health, I feel I really need too. I wish they had made the process clearer and not just in a leaflet along with every other bits of paper I get handed!"* **141097, January 2021**

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## People have expressed concerns with travelling to the nearest dentists offering NHS treatment:

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*"I have been struggling to register at a dentist for a while now, after phoning over 10 practices nearby I finally found one accepting NHS patients, not in an ideal location and a bit too far, but it's the only one I could find. I was then informed by that the waiting list for an NHS check-up would be 10-12 weeks, while if I booked a private appointment with them I would be seen much sooner. As someone with anxiety that struggles in particular with phone calls, it already felt like having to call 10+ practices was a significant barrier to being able to get a check-up, but the additional 10-12 week waiting list, and a practice that is quite far for me because I don't have a vehicle, makes it feel like I'll never be able to be seen by a dentist."* **141548, March 2021**

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*"I require dental treatment but have been unable to find an NHS dentist. [Healthwatch provided support in finding the nearest one, which is 4.5 miles away]. I will have to get a volunteer driver as I no longer drive."* **141177, February 2021**

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*"Unable to find a dentist taking new NHS patients. [Healthwatch provided details of two surgeries closest to her which are over six miles away.] This is fine as I have a car but trying to reach the location by public transport would be unreasonably time consuming."* **138946, January 2021**

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*"I do not have access to the internet. Due to other underlying medical conditions I am unable to travel far but am having dental problems."* **141421, March 2021**

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## People have shared their stories of being unhappy with the treatment they have received:

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*"My son has been attending [an orthodontist surgery] for four years. He was referred by his dentist for NHS treatment. At the initial consultation the dentist said that any fitting for braces would have to wait until he lost one of his baby teeth and at each annual visit this was repeated. It now transpires that the reason the baby tooth did not fall out was because it had become enjoined by the growing adult tooth. This now means that the root has died and my son will eventually require an implant. Not only will this be expensive but it will not be possible to fit this until he is older. [From case notes, photos, and xrays] it seems obvious that the teeth were becoming infused. I do not yet wish to raise a formal complaint as my son will still need orthodontic care at this surgery."* **140388, February 2021**

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*"I was wondering if it would be possible for you to advise me about what I should do regarding serious harm I have suffered through dental negligence caused by an NHS dentist...I wrote letters of complaint to the company, raised concerns with NHS England, the PHSO and the General Dental Council last year, however I feel as though I have been completely ignored as no one is able to take any action....[this] has completely destroyed my life as well as my family's...."* **141000, February 2021**

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## People have also shared their positive experiences of care in emergencies:

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*"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'm so anxious about it but she has made me feel safe and reassured me." 138769, January 2021*

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*"I needed to contact my dentist because a massive filling fell out I was triaged and then phoned back within the hour. The dentist could see on my records where it had been filled before and I was put on a two week waiting list but I was seen within one week!" 139298, January 2021*

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## About Healthwatch Surrey

Healthwatch Surrey is an independent organisation commissioned by Surrey County Council to give local people a strong voice in health and social care services. One of our statutory duties is to listen to Surrey residents and to share their views in order to influence, inform and challenge decision making. We believe that to be truly person-centred, service development needs to be built on patient and citizen voice alongside more quantitative data.

Every year we hear from thousands of Surrey residents. Our listening is agenda-free and shines a light not just on physical experiences but also emotional wellbeing, levels of understanding, and the impact that good or less good care has on the lives of people and their loved ones.

The experiences within this report give rich insight into the lived experiences of people using services provided by Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. This report is not intended to provide a representative portrayal of services.

- Personal details have been removed to protect the anonymity of individuals.
- All appropriate information and advice and signposting to complaints processes has already been given.
- Any urgent or concerning cases have been escalated to the appropriate teams.

We have heard from Surrey residents via Healthwatch Surrey engagement events, the Healthwatch Surrey Helpdesk, Local Citizens Advice, Healthwatch Surrey Volunteers, and Healthwatch England.