On 12th December Healthwatch England published a [report](#) on the national challenges facing patients seeking dental care.

We are consistently hearing from people across Surrey who are struggling to access NHS dentistry and are finding that the advice on how to access treatment on NHS.uk is incorrect or not up to date. The analysis of the NHS website in Healthwatch England's report showed that only 10% of the dentists in Surrey were accepting new NHS patients (or 15% in the case of children). There has been a noticeable increase in demand over the past year. This year, 1 in 4 enquiries to the Healthwatch Surrey Helpdesk concerned dentistry, compared with 1 in 7 in 2020 (and 1 in 24 in 2019).

The Covid restrictions have prevented many from accessing regular appointments, with only urgent appointments being offered, while the majority of those we hear from are unable to access NHS at all. Many have found no dentists within reach of their homes offer NHS appointments, or in the best case, have a lengthy waiting list, or can only offer appointments as a private patient. The costs of private dental treatment are difficult for many households to afford, leaving some without any means of accessing oral care.

Routine dental check-ups are vital for the monitoring of good oral health and are vital in the early detection of other health issues, most notably cancer; according to Cancer Research UK, "Many dentists routinely check for mouth and oropharyngeal cancer. So they are often the first people to spot the early signs of cancer." (UK, 2021) Oral health checks are vital prior to receiving cancer treatment an unhealthy mouth can be greatly impacted by chemotherapy, or even prior to heart surgery, as unhealthy teeth are one source of bacteria that can cause endocarditis.

The stories we have heard over the past year, are indicative that failure to address the challenges in accessing dental care will lead to higher frequencies of larger

health issues and continue to the widen the health inequalities gap across Surrey. Data provided by NHS Digital illustrates that the NHS has delivered 69% less courses of dental treatment in 2021 compared with the previous year. Prior to 2021, urgent dental care accounted for around 5% of all NHS dental treatments, now its nearly 55%.

One of the more common concerns we hear is the divide between NHS and private care, with many confused over why they can't be seen as an NHS patient for many months, whereas private appointments are readily available:

I have today phoned every dentist within 15 miles of my home address. None of which are taking new patients and waiting list of a minimum of 6 to 8 months for an appointment. However, at the same establishments, I could be seen tomorrow if I pay privately. The audacity of the dental practices! Please can we enquire into practices availability locally and ensure there is enough places for its residents. **149527 September 2021**

The lack of clear information regarding NHS-funded and private dentistry has contributed to considerable distress for those who feel that the system rewards those who can afford it and ignores those who can't:

I moved to Horley last year [2020], and I have been desperately trying to get an NHS dentist. My son who has learning disabilities had to have a tooth removed. His tooth was causing him huge distress, so I had no other option but to pay for private treatment. I cannot afford to pay privately and feel it's quite wrong "NHS" dentists don't have space yet will see you that day if you have money. 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 fees, and my son needs regular check-ups. 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**

I saw an NHS dentist who said that they will send my referral for tooth extraction. I then received a call from the Dental practice that they have received my referral but the NHS waiting time for the appointment is 18 months but privately they can see me sooner. I was shocked to hear that - I don't have any faith in the system now. Every day is a struggle for me. **150671, October 2021.**

I have been desperately trying to find an NHS dentist for my adult daughter. She has excruciating tooth pain, but after not being able to find an NHS dentist, she had to pay £95 for a consultation and some x-rays at our local dentist. She has been told she needs a root canal and a crown and has been quoted £690 for the root canal and £1000 for the crown! Having contacted around 30 dentists so far, none of them are taking on NHS patients. She really needs to get this done urgently but we can't afford that kind of money. She called 111 and they sent her to a dentist in Dorking. When she got there, she realised they were not taking on NHS patients either, so had to pay more money for a first consultant and has been booked in for the root canal and crown in 3 weeks' time costing £1000. **151389, November 2021**

There have also been cases of patients who have previously been receiving NHS dental care from a provider being told that they can now only access the service as a private patient:

I had two bridges fitted by my dentist 5 years ago. One of them was knocked out so I rang to ask for an appointment to be told they've moved me from being an NHS patient to private and they are no longer taking on NHS patients. It clearly says on their website, that they are accepting both NHS and private patients. Surely, I cannot just be cut from being an NHS patient? I'm now being charged £55 which I really cannot afford right now. **14460, May 2021**

We have also heard from those with mental health conditions who face a range of barriers when seeking dental treatment:

I was archived by my dentist as I hadn't been for a few years due to severe mental illness that left me agoraphobic. I'm really struggling to find an NHS dentist. **149279, August 2021**

I have severe Mental Health and I am in receipt of [benefits]. I am really struggling as I have a dental phobia not just due to my mental health, but I also had an upper wisdom tooth extraction which took over 2 hours - the dentist was up on my lap which absolutely terrified me. I had 4 caps fitted to my front teeth because I had Anorexia from the age of 17 and the caps were fitted when I was 25. They are now really loose and to lose my front teeth would just destroy me and I am now 60 so please help me. **149550, September 2021**

Covid restrictions have had a clear impact, causing those who have had access to NHS care to have their appointments and treatments delayed:

My NHS appointment was cancelled last March 2020 and despite recent requests, I have not been offered a new one. I have problems with old fillings and slight toothache. **144141, March 2021**.

The economic impact of the pandemic has also squeezed household finances leaving many without the means to afford private care:

I live in Reigate and am unable to locate a dentist that is prepared to take on new NHS patients. I was made redundant last year due to Covid and am currently seeking re-employment, so am unable to afford private fees. I have developed tooth ache in the last two days which is concerning me and wish to get it looked at sooner rather than later. **151484, November 2021**

There has also been a notable increase in requests for help for urgent oral and dental health issues, which is impacting on urgent and emergency care services:

Could you please help me in finding an NHS Dentist for emergency tooth care in Woking. I have been in agony for 12 days now and my symptoms match a dental abscess. It is becoming extremely difficult to sleep or function, even when I have taken many painkillers. Every dentist listed on the "find a NHS dentist" search through the NHS all state they don't do NHS patients when I have rang them, but I can't afford the non-NHS prices. When I rang 111, they couldn't help me other than tell me to keep ringing the same dentists who refused NHS treatment, and to not go to A&E until my mouth is swollen and bleeding (it isn't). I'm in a bit of a pickle, lots of pain, and really need help. **149280, August 2021**

Hi, I need some help finding an NHS dentist. I'm in a fairly low paid job and just can't afford dental treatment, and my teeth are now in a really bad way. I've tried countless times to find an NHS dentist with no luck at all. Also, my partner needs a dentist too, but she suffers from epilepsy due to a brain tumour. Again, she needs an NHS dentist because she damages her teeth every time she has a seizure. **149127, August 2021**

Aside from urgent and emergency care, the challenges in accessing dental care have been felt elsewhere in the system, such as with those who have experienced delays to cancer treatment:

I have recently been diagnosed with breast cancer and about to undergo a course of chemotherapy.   However, I have some dental issues which need to be addressed before the chemotherapy course commences and I need help finding an NHS dentist. **149534, September 2021**

There has also been a significant number of experiences from expectant or new mothers. It is especially important that they have access to regular dental care as according to NHS.uk, "…the hormonal changes a woman goes through [during pregnancy] can result in an increased risk of gum disease or other issues."

I'm trying to find an NHS dentist as I'm in pain with my wisdom teeth and 20 weeks pregnant, but I've called quite a few in my area and I'm struggling to find any I can register with. **149533, September 2021**

I would like to register with NHS dentist and book the appointment. I do have one sore tooth when I am brushing my teeth any my midwife advised me to book the appointment during my pregnancy. I have called around 100 local NHS dentist surgeries and none of these accept new registrations. Can you help me? **150379, September 2021**

I've recently had an emergency procedure with a tooth that is in need of having a root canal. I am not registered with an NHS dentist and am having trouble finding one. I am nearly 29 weeks pregnant, so I am in quite considerable discomfort only being advised to take paracetamol for the pain. I would prefer to have this procedure done as soon as possible to avoid any potential bacteria crossing over to my placenta and unborn baby. **150672, October 2021**

The inability to access NHS dental care has notably been a challenge for many with young children, with those moving into the area struggling to find a service to accommodate their family:

I am a single mum and I have a 2-year-old baby. I recently moved to Redhill and I have been unable to find an NHS dentist. My son is yet to have a dental

appointment. I have tried but the waiting list for some NHS dentist was too long - minimum 2 years. I can't afford a private dentist as I am receiving Universal Credit. I need an NHS dentist who I can get to on public transport from Redhill as I don't drive. **149340, September 2021**

We have also seen how missing these vital early years appointments has a knock-on effect, leading to those with more complex dental health needs to deteriorate:

A week ago, my 3-year-old son began complaining of toothache, screaming in pain and leaving him unable to sleep. He was born prematurely and has enamel hypoplasia, subsequently developing 4 cavities, one of which was very bad. Our regular dentist could not treat him so he was referred to a paediatric community dentist who can provide sedation or general anaesthetic. Our dentist has told me to expect a wait of at least 2 months for an appointment. I'm a single parent working part time on a low income and there is no way I can afford to pay for a paediatric dentist to treat him privately. I've been keeping on top of pain relief but at times this isn't helping him at all he is just screaming and in so much pain. Where do I turn? I don't even have the details for the place where he's being referred as our dentist said 'it will depend'. Our dentist said that due to the pandemic the waiting lists are very long and since my son's toothache is painful but not life-threatening, we could be waiting a very long time. I feel extremely anxious and worried and know his pain will only get worse without treatment. **144807, June 2021**

And the same individual contacted us again:

I am desperately trying to find another hospital for my son. Due to the almost year long wait so far with no actual treatment, the two small cavities he began with have now got significantly bigger and made further cavities in the adjoining teeth. He now needs 4 teeth extracted which is worrying anyway when two fillings were all we were expecting in February. It took over 6 months to get a phone appointment with the paediatric dentist. During this time, he had suffered with toothache and infections requiring numerous courses of antibiotics. He is unable to sleep and screaming in pain. When he has toothache, he can't eat and he's not gaining weight. He's often scared to try and eat because he's learnt that eating hurts him and it's very hard to explain to a 3-year-old why I am leaving him in pain and unable to help. After the phone appointment, it was some time before we had an appointment in person. They then referred him to have the 4 teeth

removed under general anaesthetic. The pre-op appointment was last week, and I presumed the operation would be arranged within a few weeks. But I was shocked to hear he must carry on with this pain and rotten teeth for around 6 months or more. I'm at a loss of what to do. I've looked into private clinics, but it isn't something I can afford. I feel desperate to help get him out of pain. We are awaiting an operation date at Frimley Park hospital. I've been told by the pre-op dentist that the wait [elsewhere]is 2 years rather than 6 months and I ought to feel lucky. I don't feel lucky and I'm not blaming the NHS, I work for them too. I just am shocked children can be left for over a year with painful toothache and multiple infections without any way to access treatment. **November 2021**

We are joining Healthwatch England in urging the Government and NHSE to speed up dental contract reform and provide meaningful, sustained funding to tackle the underlying problems of access and affordability. NHS dentistry should be in the frontline of tackling health inequalities and at the moment it is not working.