

Dental services during Covid-19:

Difficulties and delays in accessing
dental care in Gloucestershire

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Local health
and social care
shaped by you

Contents	Page
Introduction	2
Background	3
What people told us	3
Our findings	3
Our recommendations	4
Case study: Susan's story	4
Acknowledgements	5



Introduction

Healthwatch Gloucestershire is the county's independent health and care champion. It exists to ensure that people are at the heart of care. A dedicated team of staff and volunteers listen to what people like about local health services, and what could be improved. These views are then shared with the decision-making organisations, so together a real difference can be made. This report is an example of how views are shared.

Background

Covid-19 has brought a number of challenges to the delivery of health and care services. Healthwatch Gloucestershire has been tracking the impact on people carefully but wanted to highlight an area of real concern to the people of Gloucestershire - dentistry.

Healthwatch Gloucestershire has recently seen a spike in enquiries about accessing urgent NHS dental care - over a quarter of all enquiries between 1 July and 15 September 2020 were about this issue.

We wanted to understand why people were having difficulty getting the dental care they needed, so we called every dental practice in Gloucestershire in a mystery shopping exercise.

This report presents our findings on the provision of urgent dental treatments in Gloucestershire, for registered and unregistered people, and the experiences of those trying to register with an NHS dentist.

What people told us

People told us that they could not find an NHS dentist in the county for both urgent and routine appointments. We heard from a number of people with ongoing pain and unresolved dental issues because they have not been able to access treatment through the emergency dental hubs or through an NHS dentist. Delays have caused significant pain, inconvenience and worsening dental problems requiring further treatment.

Our findings

These are our findings and reflections about accessing dental care in Gloucestershire.

- Only three dental practices told us they were able to provide urgent dental treatment.
- 10 dental practices were unreachable, despite trying at least three times.
- 14% accurately referred us to the Gloucestershire Dental Access Centre; all staff were pleasant and helpful.
- 40% of calls were under 30 seconds long and were notably harsh in tone.
- 10% were very keen to register us as a private patient.
- 53% said waiting lists were not open.
- 25% said they did not know when waiting lists would reopen.
- 12% said their waiting lists were longer than six months.

Our recommendations

People would benefit from clear information about dental provision, in particular urgent dental treatment, and the Dental Access Centre. Better communication with people and information sharing from local practices would help the community navigate dental care. This is especially important as most dentists we spoke to are not anticipating opening their lists this year.

The public needs to be given clear reasons why access to NHS dentists is limited in this way. We recommend that NHS commissioners and dental practitioners make provision for people who are suffering from urgent dental problems.

Case study: Susan's story

Delays in dental treatment dangerously affected her health

Susan, from Cheltenham, kindly shared her story of accessing urgent root canal treatment during August and September 2020. She was repeatedly passed from one service to another, which caused her pain and anxiety, and dangerously affected her health. This also resulted in additional and costly pressure being placed on A&E and hospital services.

“On the 12th of August I called my local dental practice, where I am a registered patient, as I was experiencing mild toothache. I was advised that my own dentist was on leave and that the dental practice could not carry out aerosol generating treatment such as drilling due to Covid-19 restrictions. They offered me an appointment on 9 September with a view that this treatment would likely be available by then.

“In the early hours of Saturday morning, two days later, I woke with excruciating pain which worsened through the day. I experienced swelling around the lower jaw. I called 111 who had a dental consultant call me back. This person advised that there was no availability for emergency treatment that day and gave me a number to call for 9am the next morning. The pain worsened by the evening and another 111 call said my only option was A&E. But I was advised it would not be treated as a priority and would probably mean a long wait and strong painkillers, so it would probably be best if I sat it out until morning, so I did not go.

“I managed to see a dentist on Sunday 16 August, who advised I would need root canal work to treat a suspected tooth abscess. They referred me back to my dentist with a prescription for antibiotics which I immediately started to take. I tried numerous times the following day from 8.45am to get through to my dentist and it went to voicemail straight away. Eventually, late afternoon someone picked up the phone as I was leaving a message. They said they couldn't provide any more emergency appointments that day and to call in the morning but booked me an appointment for Friday 28 August.

“That same evening, I noticed a red patch down my neck and called 111 again. The doctor I spoke to advised I had developed cellulitis and prescribed stronger painkillers and additional antibiotics which my husband collected immediately.

“I called my dentist in the morning and the receptionist arranged a call back. The dentist was reluctant to see me but offered to have a quick look. She said I did need urgent treatment but was unable to do root canal work. She referred me back to the emergency dentist at the Dental Access Centre who told me the best option was an extraction at my own dentist. Again, I called my dentist and she said that they could not do an extraction due to the swelling and she didn't think the anaesthetic would work. By the afternoon I had developed a temperature and tried calling my own GP for advice and was told that the best option would be to try 111 or go to A&E.

“So I went to A&E. After a two hour wait, the triage nurse said I had done the right thing in coming and admitted me. I was X-rayed, the infection drained, put on IV antibiotics overnight and put on the emergency surgery list for the following day. Fortunately, I didn't need to go for emergency surgery, but they had to put me through four courses of antibiotics with a potential second night for observation.

“The doctors allowed me to leave hospital on the grounds the dentist had agreed to treat the tooth within seven days. I managed to book an appointment for Wednesday 26 August. I received a text saying this appointment was cancelled and again struggled to get through to them. When I did get through, my own dentist spoke with the hospital and agreed to go ahead with the root canal which happened a week later.

“If the emergency dentist had treated me, it is unlikely that the follow-on events would have happened!”

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Gloucestershire would like to thank those who shared their experiences with us. Without you, we would not be able to do the work that we do.

A special thanks to Susan* who shared her story with us (* not her real name).

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info@healthwatchgloucestershire.co.uk



01452 504989 or 0800 652 5193



13 Wheatstone Court, Davy Way, Waterwells Business Park,
Quedgeley, Gloucester, GL2 2AQ



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