NHS dental access report as at 16/11/20

As the pandemic has progressed, we have received an increased number of requests for help in finding an NHS dentist, and also feedback about the problems people have encountered. Our COVID survey includes many brief comments.

This short report summarises what we have been told since the beginning of lockdown in March up to 16 November 2020.

Type of contact	Number of people
Signposting following phone, email, or website contact	18
Story	4
COVID survey	49
Healthwatch England feedback form	3
Complaint	1

In addition to these numbers, three of the people from the signposting data rang us on more than one occasion, several weeks or months apart. They had still not been successful in finding an NHS dentist. One person who completed the feedback form on the Healthwatch England website did so twice, a week apart, with updated information.

Cancellation of appointments

24 people told us about cancellations of appointments at the start of lockdown, including a few being left mid-treatment. 21 people did not make any other comment. It is possible some of these appointments were for routine check-ups.
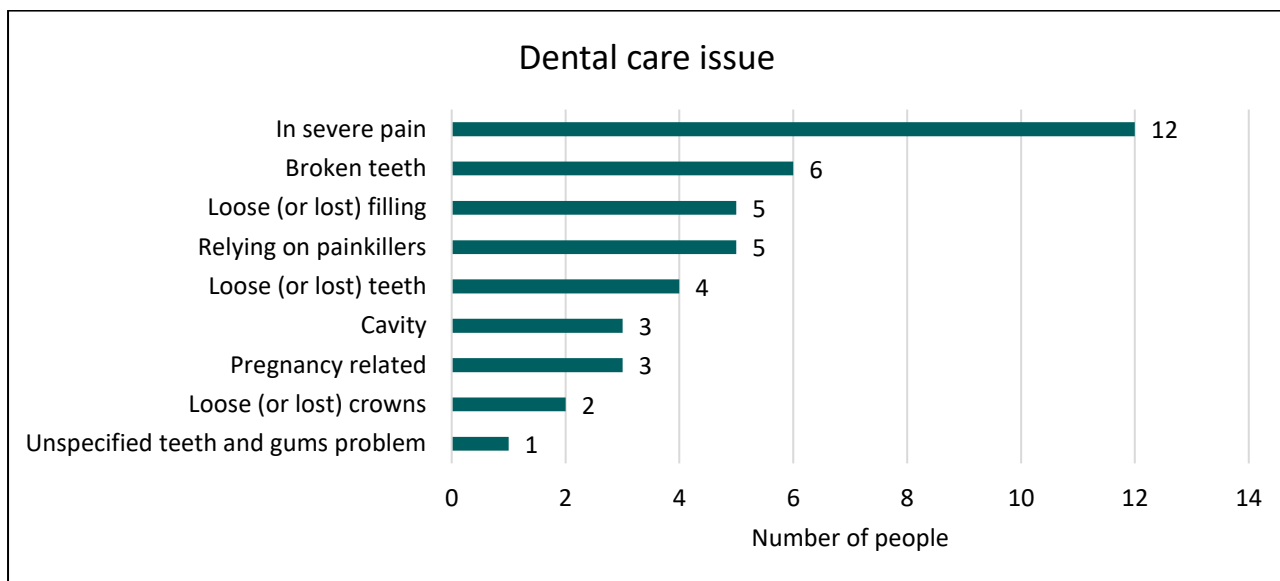
People who had treatment booked included:

- Emergency root canal treatment- had already waited 5 months for the appointment.
- Care for loose teeth and dental hygienist.
- Started unspecified treatment in February. No help offered after appointments cancelled. Taking painkillers.

Access to NHS dentists during the pandemic

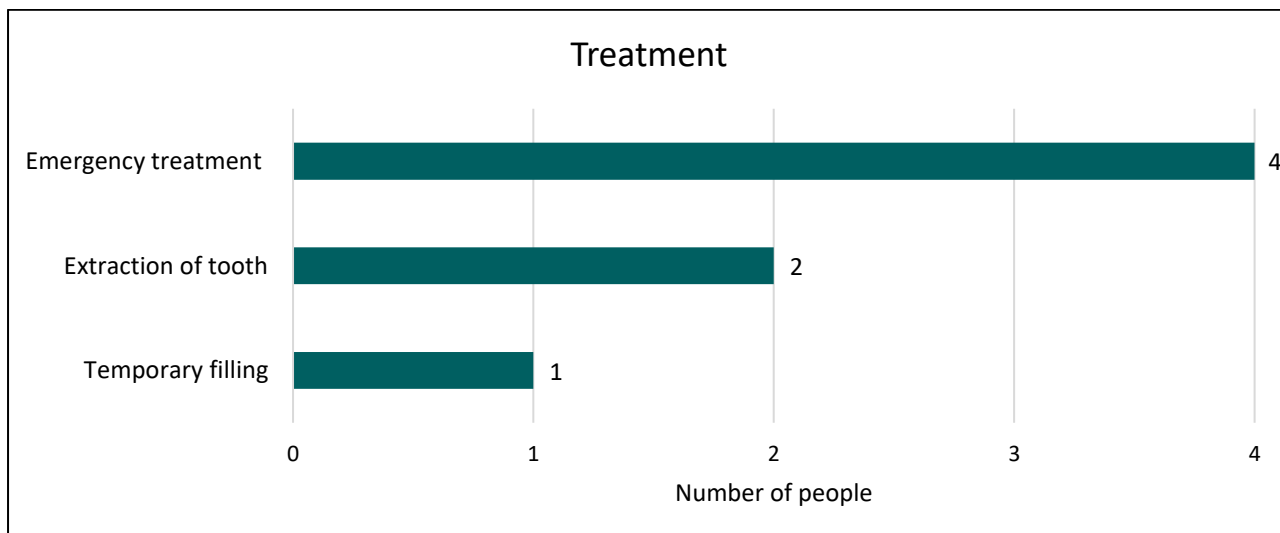36 people said they were unable to find a dentist who would provide NHS treatment.

During the first lockdown, dentists were closed, and emergency treatment was only available via the emergency telephone number. Each case was triaged, but the criteria for eligibility for treatment was extremely strict. Being in extreme pain and unable to eat or sleep were not considered severe enough, regardless of the length of time suffering. People who were eligible received the minimum treatment possible to relieve the pain. Some were told to find a dentist to complete the treatment, which they could not do.

Here is a breakdown of the types of problems people wanted to get treatment for.

Dental care issue

Issue	Number of people
In severe pain	12
Broken teeth	6
Loose (or lost) filling	5
Relying on painkillers	5
Loose (or lost) teeth	4
Cavity	3
Pregnancy related	3
Loose (or lost) crowns	2
Unspecified teeth and gums problem	1

As dentists started to re-open, they had a large backlog of patients waiting for appointments. Some people said they were offered private care but could not afford to pay. Some people were asked to pay for PPE. Most of the feedback we have received has been after the dentists were told they could re-open. Many people are still unable to access care. Dentists are not taking on new patients whilst they have so many existing patients waiting for care.

Here is a summary of the treatments people say they have been offered.

Treatment

Treatment	Number of people
Emergency treatment	4
Extraction of tooth	2
Temporary filling	1

Some of the more detailed feedback we have received (which we have summarised) includes:

- People who have an existing relationship with a dental practice:
  - Been trying to see a dentist all year. Now pregnant and unable to get the recommended check-up.
  - Dentist had incorrect contact details. When unable to contact patient, they were removed from the list. After having a brace removed at the orthodontist, a cavity was found in a tooth. Patient contacted dentist and discovered what had happened, but the dentist refused to re-add them to the practice's patient database or offer them an appointment.
  - Dentist shut and need a tooth out.
  - Dentist will only do fillings if toothache.
  - Existing dentist closed down. Unable to find another.
  - Existing dentist refused to treat toothache and swollen gums as an NHS patient because there was no bleeding or facial swelling. The person is on Universal Credit and cannot afford to pay privately.
  - Had a broken tooth and missing filling in March. Was given a temporary filling and a long wait through lockdown. Not happy about having to pay for PPE.
  - Have needed treatment for a few weeks, and in pain. Hope to soon be able to get treatment.
  - Person wants to complain because "the NHS dentist is only extracting teeth and not considering other options." The dentist said they are doing their best with the money the NHS pay.
  - Person with maternity exemption certificate expiring in January 2021 – had to wait for care, then given temporary fillings. Hopes to have proper treatment before end of October.
  - Rang dentist's practice – "useless, totally unhelpful as whole profession in hiding".
  - Spoke to dentist who said to wait in pain.
  - Tooth broke exposing nerve. Painkillers not easing pain. Over a period of weeks tried to get help. Unable to sleep, eat or drink due to pain. Discovered pregnant, so worried about health of baby when not eating or drinking. Existing dentist tried to get emergency tooth extraction but rejected twice. Person tried ringing 111, attended A & E, rang NHS England, and rang the Tameside emergency number (but not eligible because has a dentist). Healthwatch got in touch with their contact at NHS England who agreed to look into it, but in the meantime the patient rang the emergency number again and said they did not have a dentist. The tooth was removed several weeks after it broke in an emergency appointment.
  - Two loose teeth, one bleeding. Have a palette with several teeth on which no longer fits because of the loose teeth. Phoned dentist who refused appointment and very rude. Said they had no PPE and I had no pain. How did they know? "Feel it's because I'm elderly".
  - Veneer came off, piece of tooth broken and decay. Dentist closed since March.

- People without a dentist:
  - Have 2 broken teeth – been trying to find a dentist for a year.
  - Lost crown just after lockdown and can't get a dentist anywhere.
  - Person was given emergency appointment in Rochdale which the dentist rejected. Healthwatch was contacted several times for assistance, during the weeks it took to resolve this.
  - Received emergency treatment and told to find a dentist for teeth extractions. Has been unable to do so.
  - Two missing fillings have turned to cracked teeth during lockdown. Tried ringing 111 but there is no abscess and is taking painkillers so no help available.
  - Unable to find a dentist and now have no upper teeth.

Actions by Healthwatch Tameside

1. Healthwatch raised concerns at the August meeting of the Quality Performance and Assurance Group (QPAG). The Director of Quality and Safeguarding said they would raise the matter at Greater Manchester meetings.

   Healthwatch highlighted and updated on the issues at the September and October meetings of the Primary Care Delivery and Improvement Group (PCDIG). The Head of Primary Care said they would raise at Greater Manchester meetings.

2. At the end of September, Healthwatch rang every dentist in Tameside. Most said they were not accepting new NHS patients. The exceptions were:
   a. One dentist offered registration on their database but would be unable to see anyone new before April/May 2021.
   b. One dentist said they would see children on the NHS.

3. Healthwatch Manchester were showing dentists with availability on their website. In early October Healthwatch Tameside rang each of these, and the responses were:
   a. One dentist said to try again in November 2020.
   b. One dentist said to try again in January 2021.
   c. One dentist said to try again in spring 2021.
   d. One dentist said a waiting list could be joined.

4. Monthly reports are produced for commissioners and providers. The dentistry information is sent to the Quality lead at Tameside and Glossop Clinical Commissioning Group (the CCG), NHS England and the Care Quality Commission (the CQC).

5. Since September, the emails to NHS England have requested information about what is happening with NHS dental care, due to our concerns.

6. Healthwatch England are collating data at a national level, as this is a national issue. Healthwatch Tameside have provided any information requested, to add to this overall picture.

NHS website information

This website explains how to find an NHS dentist https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/dentists/how-to-find-an-nhs-dentist/

It states:

> *There is no need to register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP because you are not bound to a catchment area. Simply find a dental surgery that's convenient for you, whether it's near your home or work, and phone them to see if there are any appointments available.*
>
> *Dental surgeries will not always have the capacity to take on new NHS patients – you may have to join a waiting list, look for a different dentist who is taking on new NHS patients, or be seen privately.*
>
> *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.*

The website also explains what to do if you can't find a dentist, how to look for urgent dental care, when to visit A & E, and provides information about NHS dental charges.