

Spotlight Series

Trying to get dental care in a pandemic



March-October 2020

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, we have had a steady stream of people contacting us asking how best to get dental care.

Whilst everyone understands the difficulties imposed by Covid, many people have been in touch with us at Healthwatch Kent to share the challenges they have experienced when seeking both emergency and routine dental care.

However not all of the feedback we heard was negative; we heard some great stories too.



To date, **130** people have contacted us about dental treatment since the pandemic started.

2,099 people have accessed information on our website specifically about dental care during the pandemic.

We heard a range of stories but some key themes emerged:



People talked to us about how hard they found it to get an NHS dentist, both before and after the government announced the re-opening of dental practices from 8 June 2020.



We heard from people struggling to get appointments with their dentist and long waiting times



Callers raised concerns about the quality of the service received



We heard about the absence of PPE within NHS dental practices



People shared their concerns about the cost of going to a private dentist because they couldn't get NHS treatment



The confusion that people experienced about how to get a dentist appointment was clear

Through our work with the Kent Surrey Sussex Local Dental Network, we are well aware that dentists have faced a difficult time since the Covid pandemic started. By its very nature, dental care is challenging during a time when neither PPE or testing were readily available for patients and professionals alike. Emergency dental hubs were created at the start of the pandemic and patients were triaged and given advice over the phone.

Dentists are well aware that many people have not been seen as quickly as they would like but additional cleaning regimes and social distancing has meant that even when practises reopened, they were still seeing fewer patients than before.



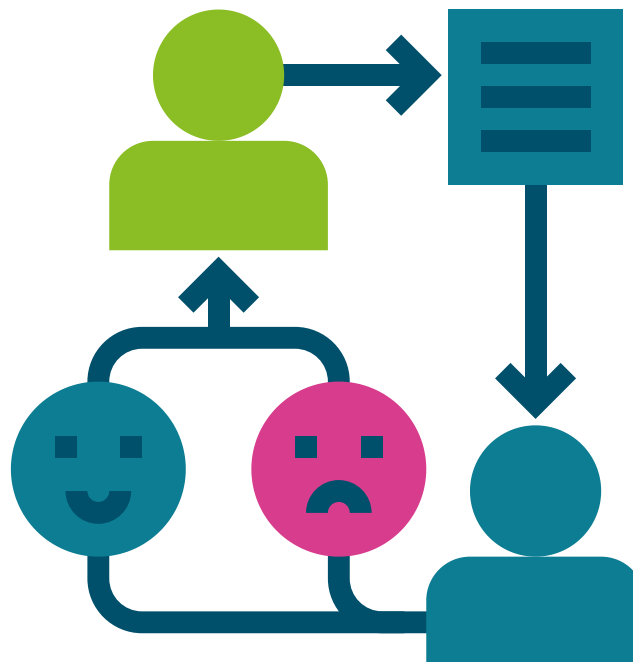
The challenge to find an NHS dentist

We've heard stories of all over Kent from people who struggled to get a dental care. This has been particularly difficult for people who aren't currently registered with a dentist and have been trying to find an NHS dentist who will treat them.

Examples include:

- *"I need to find a dentist to repair my denture."* **May 2020**
- *"I am struggling with awful toothache and an infection in my tooth but cannot find an NHS dentist who is taking on new patients in my area."* **July 2020**
- *"I am trying to find a dentist in the Maidstone area who is accepting new NHS patients. I have phoned quite a few and they are only interested in new private patients."* **July 2020**
- *"I have rung several dentists in Gravesend and out of this area to find a NHS dentist I can register with. None of them are taking on patients."* **July 2020**
- *"My Nan needs new dentures. She has guaranteed dental credit but cannot find a local dentist in Canterbury taking NHS patients".* **July 2020**
- *"Recently, I have been trying to register with a dentist in Margate. After several attempts within a 15-mile radius, every surgery has rejected me, and it has become impossible to get anywhere."* **August 2020**
- *"I rang all the dentists that Kent Dental Helpline gave me but none of them are taking on NHS patients. I'm really upset that I've had to pay for private treatment."* **August 2020**
- *"Due to the fact I didn't attend my dentist in Ashford while I was away at university, when I returned to Ashford, I had lost my place. I have been trying to find a dentist accepting new NHS patients and I cannot find any in Ashford. I need work done on my teeth which I have been scared to have done due to the pandemic, but I am getting desperate now as I am experiencing frequent pain."* **August 2020**
- *"I am trying to find an NHS dentist without any success at all. I am currently with a private dentist but can no longer afford to keep up treatment needed due to the cost. I have spent almost £1000 in the last 6 weeks and still require further treatment."* **August 2020**
- *"I've moved to Tenterden but I can't register with a dentist due to Covid"* **August 2020**
- *"I've been trying to find a dentist for my son. We were registered at a dentist 3 years ago but when we tried to make an appointment apparently we are no longer registered with that dentist. My son is Type 1 diabetic and is in agony. I've tried a few other practices with no luck."* **August 2020**
- *"As a military family I moved from overseas to Canterbury in the height of the pandemic. Since then I have not found any NHS dentist who will let me on their books. Even after I have told them I do not need a check-up right now. It is frustrating."* **September 2020**

- “I rang NHS England who gave me the Kent Dental Helpline number. The helpline said that currently no dentist in Kent is taking on new NHS patients. They asked me a few questions about my tooth problem and said if it gets bad to go to the hospital.” **September 2020**
- “I’ve phoned at least 7 dentists in my area and further afield but none will take me due to Covid.” **September 2020**
- “With my maternity exemption card I get free dental care for a year. I called 10 dentists within the Tunbridge Wells area and every single one of them said that they were not accepting NHS patients. **October 2020**
- “I’ve struggled to get an NHS dentist in Tunbridge Wells, no one is taking on any new patients. My wisdom tooth has been giving me bother so I called 111 because the NHS page is not updated. They gave me a special dentist NHS number and that number gave me the details of a practice in Medway. They were really good, just a shame that we need to travel so far to get dental treatment”. **November 2020**
- We heard about a Syrian family who couldn’t get a dental appointment. One family member had no top or bottom front teeth. They couldn’t get free dental treatment as it is not classed as an emergency. **November 2020**



Difficulties getting an appointment

Throughout the pandemic, people continued to need dental care. However people found it increasingly difficult to get an appointment, leaving many in continued pain.

- “My Mum lost a filling. We contacted the dentist who advised us to buy a temporary filling from chemist. Both me and Mum are shielding but someone collected it for us. I’m not sure how Mum will be able to put it in herself.” **April 2020**
- “My grandson had unrelenting toothache for 2 months. Antibiotics provided no relief, maximum dose paracetamol plus Nurofen gave no relief. He is only 10 years old and is begging his mother to knock him out to stop the pain. No one will see him” **June 2020**
- “I had to pull my own tooth out. I couldn’t get an appointment with my dentist and when I phoned for advice, he suggested I pull it out myself” **June 2020**
- “I’m currently on antibiotics & painkillers for a suspected infection in my bottom left jaw. My dentist won’t be set up for face to face consultations for another week or two” **June 2020**
- “I’m registered at an NHS dentist and so is my son. I rung them as my son has been having toothache, he seems to have big holes in his back teeth, on each side of his mouth. I was told by the receptionist they will get the dentist to call me back and since May, I am still waiting for the phone call (it’s now August). He now needs these teeth out and I also need to be seen too” **August 2020**



Concerns about quality of treatment

A few people contacted us to share concerns about the treatment they had received from their dentist.

- *“I had new dentures made but they did not fit properly. Dentist said they were identical to the originals, but one of my teeth is bigger than on the original and the whole denture seems too big as it moves when I’m eating and talking. After 2 weeks I returned to the dentist who adjusted the dentures, whilst insisting that they were the same as the old ones. The dentist refused to do anymore adjustments saying that is what you get with the NHS”.*
July 2020
- *“I ended up having to pay privately to have dentures made. They don't fit well and the dentist is refusing to see me until I have paid in full the outstanding amount. But this will 13 months in total as the payments are monthly”.*
September 2020
- *“I registered with a dentist in February, in West Kent. They saw me in March and didn’t get to finish the treatment because of lockdown. Now they have told me that I’m no longer registered and that’s why they haven’t called me back to finish the treatment. My broken teeth are getting worse and now I can’t find a new dentist!”*
September 2020

Absence of PPE

People talked to us about issues with PPE within dental surgeries.

- *“I was due to have 3 fillings on Tuesday, but the practice cancelled as they don’t have any PPE. I do not know who should be providing it? One tooth that was due to be filled in broke in half yesterday so I doubt it can be filled now, and it’s one of my front teeth, great!”*
July 2020
- *“I want to complain about the delay of PPE provision (because of Covid-19) being given to dentists to allow them to carry out their duties including Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGP) i.e. drilling teeth for fillings etc. Dentists are one of the most high-risk categories, especially those from a BAME background. I am outraged that NHS Dental Practices are only just starting to get PPE to enable them to do AGP.”*
August 2020



Concerns about the cost of dental services

People reported that they had been ‘encouraged’ to go private because of the lack of NHS dental provision.

- “My local dentist has informed me that his fee will TRIPLE when I next attend. I expect an increase to cover the extra cost of PPE, but triple the cost is hardly a modest increase” **June 2020**
- “I am concerned that private clinics that have PPE are charging a lot of money to do a basic function of the NHS dentist, which people without money are not able to access. One dentist I contacted wanted £25 just to make an appointment.” **August 2020**
- “I have spent almost £1000 in the past few weeks with a private dentist, but I can’t afford it anymore. I need further treatment but I can’t find an NHS dentist.” **August 2020**
- “My husband lost a front tooth during lockdown; it was in the location of an old tooth and a temporary filling. It costed £650 to sort out. Also, the lab for making a replacement tooth is shut too. Eventually this tooth will have cost around £1000”. **September 2020**
- “I just had a call to confirm my dental appointment next week but now there’s an additional £7 charge per person for PPE. Not for the dentist’s PPE, but for ME to wear. I asked if I could bring my own and I was told no! I have to use theirs, which is a disposable face shield, a pair of latex gloves and a disposable face mask. Why is it so expensive? It’s already £57 just to sit in the chair for a check up” **October 2020**

Confusion about how to get a dental appointment

People talked to us about their confusion about how to get an appointment

- “I have broken dentures and I am shielding. I don’t know what to do.” **April 2020**
- “I’m nearly 35 and haven’t seen a dentist since I was last dragged to one as a teenager, so I don’t have a clue what to do. Tonight, my worst fear, I finished dinner and felt something sharp in my mouth and I’ve somehow broken off a quarter of a molar tooth. It doesn’t hurt but it is sharp so I’m guessing I need to see a dentist. But is this going to cost me an arm and a leg? I have no idea who to ask or who to call” **August 2020**



Waiting times

We heard from people who were waiting a long time for dental treatment.

- “My daughter’s dentist decided to stop treating children two months ago. We cannot gain access to another dentist, our dentist told us that they have an 18-month waiting list. We contacted the helpline for the NHS and was told to phone back in October. My daughter is 11 and is due a check-up with no possibility of one.” **September 2020**
- “I had a referral which was made in June and I was told there is a 6 month wait. My partner's situation with her teeth has worsened, and she had to attend A&E. Although A&E are happy to do the work, they need the dentist to make a new referral, but there is the same waiting list issue.” **September 2020**

Some positive stories

- “My dentist is opening today. I am on the priority list, finally an end in sight, or at least someone to check the damage. 11 weeks and counting...I am relieved! My anxiety has been through the roof worrying about sepsis and not meeting the criteria” **June 2020**
- A lady called to tell us how wonderful all the staff at her dental practice were, especially in these challenging times. **August 2020**



Healthwatches all over England have also been hearing feedback about dental services during the pandemic. Our colleagues at Healthwatch England have pulled together the issues we have heard, alongside those voices from the rest of the country, into one national report. Together **1,300** voices were heard between June & September 2020. Whilst most of the themes are the same as here in Kent, they have made recommendations for changes on a national level.

What needs to change?

Looking at the issues people raised across the country, Healthwatch England highlighted four areas for improvement:

- **Clearer information** - NHS England and dentists need to provide more accurate and up-to-date information for patients.
- **Patient registration** - NHS England and dentists need to be clear that people don't register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP surgery. There is no guarantee of treatment at the same practice as a result.
- **Access to care** - The Government must make more resources available to dentists to help reduce the backlog caused by the pandemic.
- **Affordability** - The Government and the NHS should review the cost of NHS treatment, as many people struggle to pay the NHS charge, particularly as many people have less money as a result of the pandemic.

You can read it on their website [here](#)

What have we done with your feedback?



Firstly, we'd like to thank everyone who got in touch with us to share their experience.



We've shared your stories directly with the Kent Surrey Sussex Local Dental Network and NHS England who commission dental services.



We contacted the Kent Dental Helpline to check what advice they would give to people. They told us that most dentists were not taking new patients because of the backlog of current patients. They told us that people could contact the Dental Helpline to get a list of which dentists were accepting NHS patients. However, the feedback suggests that these lists are not up-to-date.



We have shared our leaflet on 'Getting NHS Dental Care' with everyone who has contacted us as well as making sure it is easy to find on our website. We have most recently created new up-to-date information on our website about how to get a dentist appointment in a pandemic.

What Next?

We will continue to work closely with the services to ensure they remain aware of the feedback from people about dental care.

Do keep sharing your stories with us so that we can get your voice heard

Thank You



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