Healthwatch Liverpool Online Focus Group

Access to Dental Services

26th November 2020

Introduction

On November 26th 2020 Healthwatch Liverpool facilitated a small online focus group about Access to Dental Care.

Before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic we often received enquiries about dental access, mostly from people looking for emergency dental care, or trying to find an NHS dentist to register with. We would provide enquirers with the emergency dental helpline number and/or would let them know about dental practices in Liverpool that were accepting NHS patients and had appointments available at that time, or shortly after.

Our staff team or volunteers regularly contact Liverpool dental practices to find out if they have appointments available for new patients, and if so, how soon. During the first few months of the pandemic most dental services were closed. Even once they reopened we found that it had become much more difficult for both existing and new patients to find appointment availability.

While many health services have been offering telephone and online/video consultations during the pandemic, this is difficult to do for dental appointments, unless it is to provide general advice and possibly prescribe antibiotics.

Understandably, dental practices now have to carry out extra cleaning between patients, and depending on the type of treatment staff have to wear more protective clothing (PPE). This and other measures to keep patients and staff safe has meant that dental practices can see fewer patients compared to before the pandemic, which has led to a backlog and pressures on access to dental services. We were interested in finding out more about Liverpool residents' experiences.
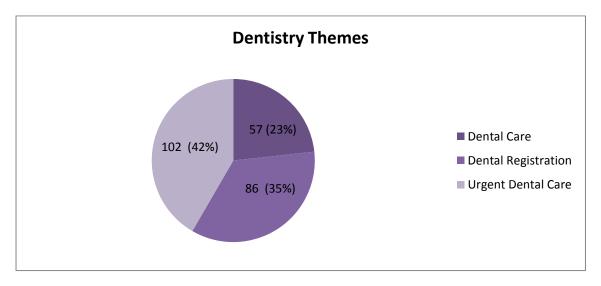
The Access to Dental Care focus group was attended by 7 people. This included a researcher from the University of Liverpool, Healthwatch Liverpool volunteers including a practising dentist who works outside of Liverpool, and Healthwatch Liverpool staff. The focus group took place on Zoom, a video conferencing application. All participants joined the group on a laptop, tablet, smartphone or other device. A member of staff facilitated the discussion, and another member of staff and a volunteer took notes of the conversation which have been used in this report. Additionally, we looked at the enquiries and feedback that we had received since April 2020 about accessing dental services; this information is included here too.

Summary of findings

Enquiries and feedback about dental access received during the Covid-19 pandemic

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in the UK and lockdown measures were put in place in March 2020, we initially received fewer enquiries than before about dental care. This may in part have been due to public awareness that dental practices had closed during lockdown. However, the number of enquiries about dental care has steadily increased since then, and from our attempts to find information for enquirers, as well as from what

enquirers told us, it was obvious that accessing NHS dental care had become much more difficult.

Between April 1st and November 12th 2020, 217 people contacted Healthwatch Liverpool with 245 enquiries about access to dental care. Some people contacted us more than once, e.g. about emergency dental care and registering with a dentist. Broadly speaking, the enquiries covered three main themes: general dental care, emergency dental care, and dental registration.

Dentistry Themes

- 57 (23%) — Dental Care
- 86 (35%) — Dental Registration
- 102 (42%) — Urgent Dental Care

General Dental Care:

Between April and November 2020, 39 people told us about cancellations and delays to their dental treatment due to the pandemic. Some told us their dental care had been interrupted because ongoing treatments had been delayed. Others could not book appointments for their regular check-ups or for other routine appointments.

Some people who responded to our Covid-19 survey[1] mentioned that they themselves might delay seeking treatment for dental issues due to fears of attending a health service during the pandemic. One enquirer wanted information on what to expect when attending the dentist in terms of Covid-19 safety measures.

Emergency Dental Care:

Between April and November 2020, 101 enquirers sought information or told us about emergency dental care treatment.

Many told us they had been triaged by telephone. Some people told us that they had experienced lengthy waits on the phone. Some were prescribed treatment over the phone (e.g. antibiotics). Several people were told that they did not need emergency dental care

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[1] Please find the reports here: https://www.healthwatchliverpool.co.uk/report/2020-07-22/coronavirus-survey-interim-report-april-may-2020 and https://www.healthwatchliverpool.co.uk/report/2020-11-25/coronavirus-survey-interim-report-may-august-2020

after triage, but were encouraged to contact the service again if the issue persisted. Often advice about pain relief was provided.

Some enquirers told us that they could not continue with just pain relief, and were desperate to see a dentist despite having been told they did not need emergency dental care on more than one occasion.

Dental Registration:

Between April and November 2020 86 people contacted us for information about registering with a dentist in Liverpool. Of these, 54 told us that they experienced difficulties finding an NHS dental practice. Many, if not most dental practices were not accepting new patients, and others had long waiting lists. Many of these enquirers had received emergency dental treatment, and had been advised to register with a dentist for continuation of treatment, but had found it impossible to do so.

For some people there were additional barriers to getting registered with a dental practice; for example, some told us that the location of those few practices that did have availability was too far away. This was especially the case for people with reduced mobility, on a low income and/or without access to a car.

One professional contacted us requesting assistance with dental registration for migrants, as they had not been able to find dental care.

We were also asked about dental registration for children and young people by some professionals and parents/carers; again, this proved difficult, leading to concerns about delays in treatment.

We also heard from some people who had recently moved to Liverpool and were unable to register with a local dentist. Some students told us the same.

Finally, we were told that some dental practices did have capacity for patients paying privately, but not for NHS patients at that time.

Feedback from Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)

Recent feedback from Liverpool CCG confirmed that they have also had an increasing number of enquiries and complaints about access to dental services. CCG staff had tried to find dental appointments but at times had to refer patients out of area, for example to Manchester, as there had been so few local appointments available. The CCG also received enquiries from people outside of Liverpool, who were trying to find appointments here.

The Return Project

A researcher from the University of Liverpool introduced the Return Project, which started in September 2018 and is aimed at reducing inequalities within access to primary dental care within Liverpool.

The project hopes to go to the next stage in the spring of 2021 (depending on Covid-19 restrictions). The researchers aim to speak to people from a wide variety of backgrounds. As they are aware that the pandemic has made some people more fearful about attending

dental appointments, they want to design an information leaflet with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQS) and advice about staying safe.

Focus group discussion

All focus group participants were registered with a dentist, and most had received texts or emails from their practice updating them about changes to services due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One had received a link to a video that explained what measures the dental practice had implemented to make sure that patients and staff are safe, which they found helpful. One person hadn't been contacted since May, and did not want to contact their practice at the moment as there was no reason to. Also, they were not sure about what measures the practice they attend had put in place to manage the Covid pandemic. They said they would be more likely to go to the practice if they were given more information and reassurance about this; for instance, they were worried that they might have to spend time in a waiting room near other patients.

Participants mentioned that the cost of dental appointments is a barrier for people. Not everyone was aware of the NHS low income scheme and the HC1 form which may entitle patients to financial support with NHS dental costs. Also, participants mentioned that some people may not realise that NHS dental treatment price bands ensure that patients pay a set amount. From 14th December 2020, Band 1 treatment (e.g. a dental check-up, X-rays, advice) costs £23.80, Band 2 treatment (e.g. a check-up **and** fillings including root fillings) costs £65.20, and Band 3 treatment (e.g. check-up, fillings **and** a denture, crown or bridge) costs £282.80[2].

We discussed other reasons why people may avoid or postpone going to the dentist, including fear or anxiety, or having had a negative experience in the past. Others found it difficult to take time off work. Some people didn't feel the need to see a dentist until they experienced pain. Also, sometimes patients were forced to change dentist because the practice they had been attending stopped seeing NHS patients, which could lead to longer gaps between appointments.

A participating dentist said that despite the limitations in place due to Covid-19, they will try to address problems and prioritise patients, particularly if patients are in pain. They added that currently there are issues between offering private and NHS appointments; because of the pandemic, the way that dental practices are remunerated for the treatment that they provide has changed. Current guidance suggests that treatment should be kept to a minimum, and it often feels like dentists are firefighting at this moment in time.

In response to some of the feedback Healthwatch had received, the dentist also said that in their practice (outside Liverpool) they are trying to see children wherever possible, preferably with one chaperone. They were also still seeing children with SEND, although the changes dental practices had to make (e.g. wearing PPE) could be particularly

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[2] For a full overview of what dental treatment fits in which Band, please go to https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-dental-charges-14-december-2020 (last viewed 11/01/2021)

challenging for some children with SEND, but they had found that using pictures showing what to expect could be helpful, including with non-verbal children.

Main messages

It comes as no surprise that the pandemic has considerably worsened access to dental treatment. Fewer NHS dental appointments are currently available, and those that are have to be used for the patients with the worst symptoms. NHS England, who plan and buy services, should consider increasing the number of NHS appointments made available, as a large backlog has built up, and people will experience ever-increasing difficulties in trying to get the care they need.

At the same time, some patients are more reluctant to go to the dentist due to safety concerns and not knowing what to expect during the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be helpful to provide information about the measures that dental practices are taking to keep patients and staff safe at the current time.

Most focus group participants had received information from their dental practice about what to expect when attending an appointment. In what was seen as good practice by the group, one dental practice sent patients a link to a video explaining what happens when visiting the practice at the current time. This was easily accessible and understandable, and the person who received it said they had felt reassured by it.