Experiences of accessing Dental Care Services in Shropshire

Engagement Report

Engagement period:
May – July 2021

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About Healthwatch Shropshire

Healthwatch Shropshire is the independent health and social care champion for local people

We work to make your voice count when it comes to shaping and improving services. We use a variety of methods to find out what people like about services, and what could be improved and we share these views with those with the power to make change happen. We are not experts in health and social care. Our reports go to:

- the organisations who provide services
- the commissioners who pay for services (e.g. Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Clinical Commissioning Group and Shropshire Council)
- service regulators (the Care Quality Commission, NHS England)
- our national body Healthwatch England, to let them know how services are working in Shropshire

Hot Topics are a targeted activity looking at a particular aspect of health or social care and just one of the methods we use to put a spotlight on services and ask people to share their views with us. Hot Topics are publicised and promoted through our engagement activities (e.g. talks and stands at events) for 1-2 months. To gather more information we might also do surveys and focus groups. During the pandemic we have had to rely on online communication.

Please note

Hot Topics are not time limited and so while we have targeted our engagement on access to Dental Care Services during May to July 2021 we continue to want to hear from people who are willing to share their experiences with us and we will share them with the providers, commissioners and regulators.

The context

What we were hearing pre-pandemic (2019)

During the latter half of the year in 2019 and early 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, we had heard of a couple of experiences where people in the Oswestry area were struggling to find a dentist offering NHS services following the closure of a dentist in Oswestry.

What happened to dental services during the first wave of the pandemic: March – July 2020

During the first wave of the pandemic, March to July 2020, access to community dental services was severely affected due to the high Covid-19 infection risk of dental procedures and the need for rigorous infection control measures. The NHS organised for patients to be able to access emergency services through a number of practices in each area. Access to emergency treatment was available through the NHS 111 service. The problems in accessing dental services was a theme reported in our survey of Health, care and wellbeing services during the Covid-19 pandemic

What we heard during late 2020 and early 2021

Following a post on a community Facebook page in October 2020 we heard from 14 residents of Market Drayton who were unable to access NHS dentistry services because their practice had stopped providing NHS services. We passed on the comments and others we had received to those in the NHS who are responsible for organising NHS dentistry in Shropshire. They told us;

- 'It is our firm and agreed intention to procure a new dental practice in Oswestry. We were about to launch the tender just at the point that the pandemic escalated … We have taken the decision to temporarily pause this procurement … We will however proceed with the Oswestry procurement once things start to return to normality. It was very helpful to hear of the access challenges regarding Market Drayton. We will be able to specifically monitor this which will help support any future plans to commission further dental activity in Market Drayton or indeed procure a new service in the way we are in Oswestry.'

Soon after this Healthwatch England published a report indicating that problems accessing dental care were widespread across the country, COVID-19 pandemic pushes NHS dentistry to crisis point, finds new report | Healthwatch

During the early part of 2021 we continued to hear about problems with access and these included experiences from places other than Market Drayton and Oswestry.

In the period from autumn 2019 to spring 2021 we heard from 102 people about their experiences of NHS community dental services. Ninety people had negative experiences of NHS dentistry in Shropshire, 80 of these (89%) were from people who were unable to find a dentist providing NHS services.

What we did

We decided that we should try and find out if there were other areas of Shropshire that might have problems with access to NHS dental services.

We put out a call for people to share their experiences with us, both good and not so good. This went out via social media, a press release to the local media channels, resulting in an interview on Radio Shropshire, and a call sent to our contacts across the community.

What we found out

Experiences

106 people (93%) reported a negative experience, 8 people (7%) reported a positive experience.

Of the 106 people reporting a negative experience, 95 people gave us some detail.

Registration

77 people (81%) told us they were unable to register with a dentist providing NHS dental services.

Waiting Times

Eleven people (12%) told us they were registered with an NHS dentist but faced long waiting times to get an appointment

- 'No dentists taking on NHS patients currently [in Wem]. My son has had to register in Shrewsbury and can't get seen until October!' [comment received in May]

Service closure

Fifteen people (16%) told us that they were having problems accessing NHS services following the closure of their dentist in Oswestry

- 'Been struggling to find an NHS dentist for myself & 2 children since our dentist, XXX, closed its door two years ago. We simply don't have the funds to go private. We are being forgotten about sadly.'
- 'I have had issues trying to find an NHS Dentist in Oswestry and surrounding areas for the past 2 years. Our NHS dentist closed and I have not found one since.'

'De-registration'

Seven people (7%) told us about their experiences of being 'de-registered' as an NHS patient. Several were offered private treatment at the same practice

- 'I have been shielding since the start of the pandemic. I was an NHS patient at XXX dental practice in Ludlow. I called them 3 months ago when restrictions started to ease. They told me because it was more than two years since my last appointment I had been taken off the NHS list of patients and would have to go privately. They hadn't told me or consulted me about removing me from the register. I've been shielding so I couldn't have gone. The problem is that I have a temporary filling which needs to be completed. So now I have no dentist, difficulty with the temporary filling. I am 81 years and very breathless. I am worried that the teeth on the other side will break down as I can't eat on the filling side'
- 'I am 81 and need an NHS Dentist. I can't drive and my leg is bad so going on the bus is very difficult. I had an NHS Dentist but was taken off the list without being told because I let the appointment lapse. Doesn't seem fair that there are appointments for those who can pay. I've been told that I need to ring back in 2 months but I don't know what to do. Do I pay or wait? How will I know if the situation changes?'

Note:

From the comments we received there appears to be a widely held misconception that patients are registered with an NHS dental service in the same way that a patient registers with a GP practice.

In fact the NHS states:[1]

🍃 '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. But that does not mean you have guaranteed access to an NHS dental appointment in the future.'

An example of what some patients were told by their practice was:

🍃 'As a patient at the practice, you will be aware that I have been committed to caring for your dental needs and providing you with a high level of dental care within the NHS. This has been made possible as a result of your continued loyalty towards me and the trust you have in me as your dentist. However, in recent times, many of my patients have commented that they would prefer more choice as to the frequency of their routine care appointments and I want to ensure I can continue to offer the first-class care patients deserve.

I very much want to continue to offer the highest level of care to my patients and I feel the best environment in which to achieve this would be on a private treatment only basis. Dentistry has seen many technological

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[1] How to find an NHS dentist - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

advances over the last ten years, with a number of advanced treatments and materials which are not available within the NHS, and I wish to be able to offer these to all of my patients. Therefore, as of the 1st April 2021, I have decided to move to an independent care system and will be opting out of providing NHS dentistry for all my patients. There will be ongoing NHS provision at the practice for patients.'

Private Treatment

Fifteen people (16%) told us about their experiences of being offered private treatment, a recurrent theme was frustration with the availability of private appointments but not NHS appointments:

- 'Just moved to Whitchurch in March. No NHS dentist taking on new patients yet strangely enough, they CAN accommodate new private patients. So the more people who are desperate for treatment find they have no choice but to go private. That reduces appointments for NHS patients.'
- 'Unable to access NHS service. Only offered private appointment which I cannot afford. Appears like dentists are trying to cash in using covid as an excuse.'

Cost of treatment

The cost of private treatment was raised as an issue in 17 (18%) comments:

- 'It cost £40 to have an assessment. I have had to go to a private dentist in Ellesmere. I had tonsil cancer 12 months ago …. It has now all cleared but I was told to have a check up every 3 months. I haven't been able to work for a year and the expense is difficult. I can't drive and so have to keep asking a friend to take me and I worry about them getting covid. Dental hygiene and checks are obviously very important for me but £40 every 3 months is very difficult.'
- 'I ended up with awful tooth pain and had to pay a large sum for emergency dental treatment and still need more. I'm now faced with the decision of getting into debt or leaving my teeth to get worse and leave me in considerable pain! I personally feel it is unacceptable to have so little (or no choice at all!) for people trying to access dental care.'

Information

A lack of information was raised in 8 (8%) of experiences. This ranged from not having access to up-to-date information about NHS provision to a lack of information when service provision

changes, including when a person is deemed ineligible to carry on receiving NHS treatment as several of the comments above illustrate:

- 'I have used the https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist, it is completely out of date, the first 8 I tried did not have spaces despite what the website says.'
- 'If new dentists and NHS places are available where are they advertised? I don't have the internet. I mostly get my information from Shropshire Radio and the Shropshire Star.'
- 'I did go private, but it was expensive, and during the first lockdown they changed ownership without telling people. We found out via a neighbour! I've looked at returning but surprise, surprise you have to re-register (and pay). They conveniently don't have the old records.'

Services for children

The effect on children was raised by 16 people (16%) both the issues of lack of access to treatment now but also the long term impact:

- 'My dentist used to be NHS, but when he retired it's gone private! Just had to pay a lot of money for my 5 year old to be seen ☹ It's terrible that children can't get access to free dentistry, surely there should be a mandatory requirement that every dental surgery has a percentage of their clients as NHS patients, or at least must offer it to under 16's!'
- 'I have 3 children who have not seen a dentist for 2 years as I am unable to access any NHS dentists. I am worried for their dental hygiene. If I have to pay for treatment it will be very expensive.'
- 'My son lost his 2 front teeth in an accident aged 9 we were registered in Oswestry until our dentist closed down. We have tried for years to get in with another dentist. He has a plate with 2 teeth on it which has broken twice and is broken again I have spent days trying to get seen by a dentist but no one will help we have had to pay to have it repaired twice already, he is 15 and in education so shouldn't even have to pay. He is supposed to have fluoride treatment once every 3 months which is also not happening. Please help!!'

Services for the elderly

The effect on the elderly was raised by 7 people (7%), prohibitive costs and travel issues were raised:
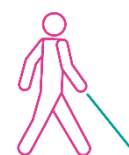
- 'I was in a very nice one in Shrewsbury before but because I'm 75 and finding it harder to drive I needed something much closer to home so moved to [XXX

dental practice Market Drayton]. Now they have stopped I can't find another NHS dentist close by. I want to get something in town.'

- 'As a recently retired dentist (2018) with 23 years working in the NHS in a dental access centre within Herefordshire, I can tell you that access to NHS Dentistry in South Shropshire has been difficult for many years. This has now been exacerbated by the pandemic which has been extremely stressful for members of the profession and their full capacity is unlikely to recover for some years, if at all, in my opinion. Access has been particularly difficult for people with a disability or elderly frail who often have to travel long distances to be treated within the Community services. This will only worsen with an influx of retirees into the area without adequate health care provision and staffing.'
- 'As an 80-year-old pensioner on benefits I am unable to pay for dental treatment. I am unable to find a dentist locally who will take me on under the NHS scheme and have no transport to travel out of the area.'

Different experiences in different areas

We were able to map 143 of the experiences of accessing dentists we heard about during the Hot Topic and the lead up to it.

Sentiment ● Good dentist access ● Poor dentist access
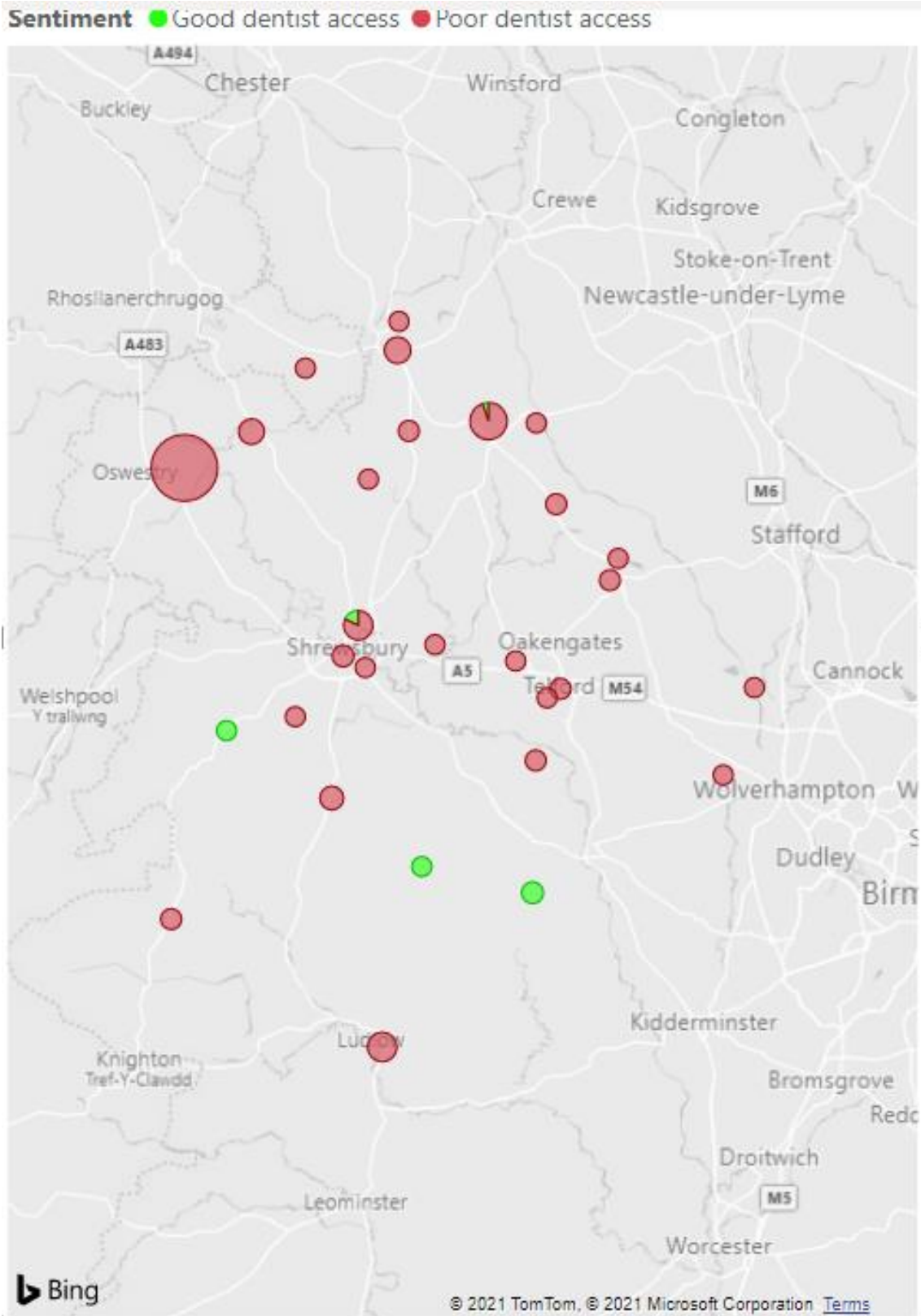
The results are summarised in this table:

Area	Poor dentist access	Good dentist access
Oswestry	50	
Market Drayton	21	1
Shrewsbury	14	2
Ludlow	11	
Whitchurch	10	
Ellesmere	7	
Church Stretton	5	
Telford	4	
Bridgnorth		3
Newport	3	
Bishop's Castle	2	
Broseley	2	
Prees	2	
Much Wenlock		1
Pontesbury		1
Shawbury	1	
Wem	1	
Stafford	1	
Wolverhampton	1	
Grand Total	135	8

Key Findings

- There is poor access to routine NHS dental services across Shropshire but this appears to be worse in some areas.
- There is a lack of accurate information about whether there are dentists taking on NHS patients.
- There is confusion caused by the current approach to the issue of "registration".

Recommendations

- NHS England to continue their work with dentists to quickly improve patient access to NHS dental care in Shropshire.

- Provision of more accurate and up-to-date information for patients. Dental practices to ensure that the information about their practice on Find a dentist - NHS (www.nhs.uk) is kept up to date. If NHS dental services become available in a community this should be publicised in a variety of ways so that the widest audience is made aware.

- Dentists and NHS England to provide clarity over NHS dentists' obligations relating to patient registration. Dentists need to clarify this with their patients and NHS England with the public in general.

NHS Dental Commissioners Response

We have asked those working in NHS England who commission NHS dental services in Shropshire to provide a response to this report:

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a huge impact on the number of patients that a dentist can see, due to the proximity between a dental professional and a patient's airway and the relatively high proportion of aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) undertaken, dentistry presents unique challenges around infection prevention and control.

Patients with urgent dental care needs and those in vulnerable groups are being prioritised, which may still mean that there are longer waits for routine appointments than before the pandemic. Due to reduced routine access, there is now a significant backlog of people who will not have seen a dentist recently. NHS England & NHS Improvement – Midlands has developed a number of initiatives to further increase access, such as commissioning weekend access sessions from practices that wanted to participate.

NHS England and NHS Improvement – Midlands will continue to finalise its procurement plans to secure a new NHS dental practice in Oswestry and review access in other areas of Shropshire.

Our focus is firmly on supporting dentists and their teams to see as many patients as safely possible. Infection prevention and control means a return to normal practice is not yet possible, but we are asking practices to manage a minimum of 60 percent of pre COVID-19 dental activity, and a minimum of 80 percent of pre COVID-19 orthodontic activity. We expect these measures to be in place until October 2021 when further assessment will be undertaken.

It is not necessary to register with a dentist. Unlike GPs, patients do not have to be on a dentist's list and they can move to dentists that are more convenient to them or who have been recommended. However, not all dentists choose to be NHS dentists. Some only take private patients, some undertake NHS work, or a mixture of both NHS and private. Due to the existing limitations around COVID-19, it may however be difficult at present to find a dentist who is taking on new NHS patients. Patients should not be pressured into private care where they wish to have treatment on the NHS and it should not be the case that they are unable

to get an urgent NHS appointment where a practice has capacity to offer routine private check-ups.

The www.nhs.uk website provides details of local dentists, although not all may be taking on new patients at this time. Dentists are responsible for updating their current acceptance status but where their status has not been updated within the previous 90 days their status is automatically removed, as it could be out of date. NHS England & NHS Improvement - Midlands will contact all Shropshire dental practices to request that they update their acceptance status on a regular basis to assist patients.

Patients that have an urgent dental need and have not been able to access an NHS dentist should contact NHS111 who will provide advice and information on services to contact.

Dental services provider response

We have asked the Local Dental Committee (LDC) for Shropshire to provide a response to this report on behalf of dental practices in the area. This will be included when received.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Shropshire would like to thank the organisations who helped to promote this Hot Topic. We particularly thank all those people receiving services who have shared their experiences with us.

Get in Touch

Please contact Healthwatch Shropshire to share your views and experiences of this service or any other health and social care service in Shropshire. We gather comments anonymously and share them with service commissioners and providers to highlight areas of good practice and identify areas for improvement.

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