

# Access to NHS dentistry in Norfolk

April to June 2021

July 2021

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## Who we are and what we do

Healthwatch Norfolk is the independent voice for patients and service users in the county. We gather people's views of health and social care services in the county and make sure they are heard by the people in charge.

The people who fund and provide services have to listen to you, through us. So, whether you share a good or bad experience with us, your views can help make changes to how services are designed and delivered in Norfolk.

Our work covers all areas of health and social care. This includes GP surgeries, hospitals, dentists, care homes, pharmacies, opticians and more.

We also give out information about the health and care services available in Norfolk and direct people to someone who can help.

At Healthwatch Norfolk we have five main objectives:

1. Gather your views and experiences (good and bad)
2. Pay particular attention to underrepresented groups
3. Show how we contribute to making services better
4. Contribute to better signposting of services
5. Work with national organisations to help create better services

We make sure we have lots of ways to collect feedback from people who use Norfolk's health and social care services. This means that everyone has the same chance to be heard.



## Summary

- There is a limited Norfolk NHS Dental Provision
- Dentists are unable to take on new NHS patients
- Vulnerable Patients are missing out on treatment
- Very few practices have a waiting list or emergency treatment available to non-registered NHS patients
- People are frustrated about this situation and calling on the Government to take action
- Patients are being forced to go private for treatment
- There is a lack of communication between patients and some dental practices
- The pandemic has further restricted access to dental appointments



# 1. Why we looked at this

## 1.1. Context and background

Since before the pandemic, it has been apparent that NHS dentistry provision in Norfolk is in crisis. In October 2020 we published a report that collated the experiences of Norfolk residents relating to access to emergency and non-emergency NHS dental care.

The report highlighted the signposting queries we have received regarding dental services in Norfolk since January 2020. It also detailed reviews of practices collected by our engagement team and investigations carried out by Healthwatch Norfolk into access to dentistry for unregistered patients. Resultantly, we have raised concerns with NHS England and Improvement, Norfolk's Health Overview Scrutiny Committee and the local press.

Since publishing this report, public dissatisfaction at the perceived gulf in provision of NHS dental care is still palpable. Indeed, throughout the pandemic the issue of NHS dentistry has increasingly become a regular focus for local and national media outlets.

In December 2020, Healthwatch England released a report which detailed the experiences of 1,313 people in relation to NHS dentistry services. The report found that more than 7 in 10 people (73%) found it difficult to access help and support when they needed it compared to just over 1 in 10 (11%) who could access care easily. The report also found that even those who are already registered with a dental practice are struggling to book routine care and access emergency treatment due to the backlog and ongoing restrictions caused by COVID-19.

While many areas of health and social care in Norfolk are making headway in clearing COVID-induced patient backlogs, dentistry is still facing critical capacity issues in Norfolk. This briefing presents public accounts of people spending extended periods on waiting lists, or in many instances of patients being turned away altogether when trying to join a practice as a new patient. This situation risks oral health and degrades the very principle of prevention that is central to local and national public health strategies. While the disturbance caused by COVID-19 cannot be overlooked, evidence collected by Healthwatch Norfolk suggests that issues with service provision far precede the pandemic. This is further substantiated by appeals from Vice Chair of the British Dental Association (BDA), Eddie Crouch, who in February 2019 said:



“Across England practices are now unable to fill vacancies, as a system of unforgiving targets pushes talented colleagues out.

Dentists were looking for a lifeline in the recent 10 Year Plan, but were offered little more than a footnote. The practitioners who have done most to support the NHS - and the patients who need them - are now paying the price for that indifference.”

At Healthwatch Norfolk we implore those responsible for commissioning and delivering dental healthcare in Norfolk - and indeed across the country - to forensically examine the reasons why so many are struggling to receive a service they are entitled to. This process will require honesty and willingness to look beyond COVID-19 as a sole cause, also considering wider issues such as NHS dental contract reform, recruitment and retention, and conversion from public to private practice among dentists.

A prominent theme underlined in this briefing is the public perception that many dentists are “going private”. Again, this concern is ratified by the BDA, who earlier this year, conducted a poll of dentists, in which 47% said they were “likely” or “extremely likely” to “reduce their NHS commitment” in favour of private practice. Understanding the motivation behind this sentiment is key, and it is incumbent upon local commissioners, providers and legislators to communicate professional and public concerns upwards.

## 1.2. Objective

We hope that this briefing can contribute to constructive scrutiny of the way in which dental services are delivered in Norfolk. Consulting up-to-date public feedback is a reliable way to gauge the strength of feeling and can be the catalyst for system-wide improvement in dental access.



## 2. How we did this

To gain real-time insight into public opinion of dental services in Norfolk we adopted a new approach of using advanced keyword searches on Twitter and Facebook. Between April and May 2020 we trawled these online platforms to tap in to conversations being had by people in Norfolk relating NHS dental access. Using Tweetdeck, we searched for keywords such as included ‘dentistry’ ‘dentist’, ‘dental’, ‘dentists’, ‘NHS dentist’. Search radiuses were set to only include posts within Norfolk. Facebook community noticeboards were also referenced as a reliable source of public sentiment. Tweets and Facebook comments published by online users are in the public domain and are therefore accessible to researchers.

To supplement this approach, between April and June 2020 we used Bang the Table’s online engagement software, Engagement HQ, producing an interactive map that individuals could leave comments on about dental access in their area (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Comments received about dental access via our ‘Community Conversation Hub’.

We extracted a total of 47 tweets and comments and received 16 reviews via Engagement HQ, resulting in 63 pieces of individual feedback. Furthermore, we received 89 signposting enquiries about accessing NHS dental care, many of which were also analysed to contribute to the overall findings of this report. This means that between April and May 2021, 152 individuals contacted us about issues with dental provision in their area.

Comments and feedback were thematically analysed and a report of these themes is presented below. Comments in this report are direct quotes from survey



respondents. These have been left unchanged to ensure originality. Any major spelling or grammar errors are noted with “[sic.]”.



## 3. What we found out

### 3.1. Limited Norfolk Dental Provision

Healthwatch Norfolk continues to hear concerns about dentistry and access to dentistry in this county remains incredibly difficult.

Everyone I have phoned - even the ones that say online that they are taking new NHS patients, such as BUPA Gorleston - has said that they are not taking on NHS patients and have no plans to do so. That includes the ones that the NHS website lists as taking on new patients.

Patients have been struggling to access NHS appointments in Norfolk because practices are either not taking on new NHS patients or have no available NHS appointments.

After phoning every dentist in Watton, Wymondham and Attleborough, and having been laughed at by one receptionist and not able to even be added to a waiting list I gave up for a day have not visited a dentist for about 5 years.

### Vulnerable Patients Missing out

Vulnerable members of society are unable to access dentist appointments or even register at Dental Practices. This includes children, those that are pregnant, people with pre-existing health conditions and those aged 65 or over.

I have recently moved back to the area and cannot find anyone to see me, despite having had a broken tooth since January and being over 65.

Members of the public are telling us that currently there are no Dental Practices in Norfolk accepting new patients or able to give emergency treatment to non-registered patients, leaving some people stuck in pain with no solution.



I looked elsewhere but no one was taking NHS patients on. I then fell pregnant in 2019 and have been able to receive free treatment due to pregnancy but still no luck. I then broke a tooth during pregnancy, still no luck, not even for emergency. I continued my search with no luck. I then became pregnant again at the end of 2020 and broke another tooth, after calling 111 and receiving a reference number to call the emergency out of hours dentist, I called the number a minimum of 30 times a day, 4 days a week, to which no response! I have now not been able to see a dentist since before 2017 and am in desperate need of a few treatments on my teeth due to the damage that is caused during pregnancy. What do I do? What are my options? I cannot afford private treatment; I am exempt still at the moment as I am still pregnant.

People with chronic illnesses are struggling to access NHS appointments, despite being told they require dental treatment from their consultant and the fact that their long-term health condition could directly affect the health of their teeth.

I suffer with systemic lupus and have had a lot of dental issues in the past I currently have 5 loose teeth and am in a lot of pain I have 2 partial dentures which are poorly fitted my dentist I had 2 years ago is no longer accepting NHS patients and took me off their books as I hadn't attended for nearly 2 years although this was due to being unwell with my lupus I am desperate for dental treatment as my mouth is so sore and inflamed and I am bleeding from my teeth every time I try to clean them.

We have received many reports of children unable to access an NHS dentist and there are children in the county that have never seen a dentist.

My 8-year-old has never seen one [a dentist]. When we moved to Norwich, we joined waiting lists but never actually got a dentist. Now have a 5 and 1 year old that also have never seen one. I've emailed or called ever dentist within 2 hours drive from here in the last year that I could find and no one ever has space.

## No Waiting Lists

There are very few Dental Practices in Norfolk that have a waiting list, due to the sheer demand for their services; with practices prioritising a huge backlog of treatment for existing patients or their practice simply does not do them.



I have been trying to get registered with an NHS dentist in Cromer since March 2020. It is just not possible, there is no waiting list, so you just have to keep phoning.

I phoned the Marham practice- they say they currently have a queue of 500 people waiting to be accepted as NHS patients. So that means, effectively, that they are not taking on patients, given how long it will take for a queue that size to clear.

### No Access to Emergency Treatment

Access to urgent NHS treatment was impossible for non-NHS registered patients in a lot of pain. They are being told that emergency appointments within Dental Practices are for registered patients only.

Unfortunately, we had to phone 111 last weekend due to having problems with his teeth which caused more pain than usual. I have looked on the NHS page and phoned multiple dentist practices, however nowhere is accepting new patients.

The lack of emergency dental appointments means that people are being forced to ring 111 or access already strained A&E departments to deal with dental pain.

Throughout lock down my tooth got infected and no dentist would see me for an emergency appointment. I had to go to the James Paget hospital A&E department to have liquid morphine administered and antibiotics. I spent 5 days calling dentists to no avail. My neck and face were swollen to the point it affected my breathing, so I went back to A&E where they gave me a different type of antibiotic as the first set weren't fighting the infection. I was then told by A&E staff that I would not be allowed back to have my tooth looked at as they aren't dentists. They told me that if I start to struggle to breathe then I should get myself to the Norfolk and Norwich hospital.



## 3.2. Lack of Communication with Patients

### Patients De-registered / Dentist Practises Closing / Cancelled Appointments

Good communication between a patient and their dentist is imperative to maintain patient satisfaction, make a diagnosis and improve patient outcomes. Patients are having their appointments cancelled multiple times and some practices are closing without prior warning to their patients.

My dentist closed its doors to NHS patients after first lockdown and then shut down altogether! No notice at all and no one can see you.

There is confusion about people being de-registered and with dentists and how the registration process works.

I was a patient at UEA dentist for over 20 years. I was three weeks late making an appointment because I hadn't realised that they had changed their minimum time from 18 to 15 months - they had informed my husband in his work email but not me They removed me from their list and despite appealing the decision would not reinstate me.

### Out of Date Information

Inaccurate information from the NHS 111, NHS Choices and dental practice websites can leave people frustrated and confused.

Apart from not being able to find a dentist I complained that the website page "find an NHS Dentist" is useless, few that do bother to update the page are not taking NHS patients the remainder have not bothered in my reckoning years. What is the point of them even being listed?

People needing treatment are forced to phone around individual practices to enquire about registering with a practice. With so many Norfolk residents trying (and failing) to register with an NHS Dentist, any misinformation on these NHS websites regarding Dentistry availability can lead to greater frustration and despair.



Many also don't update their websites so you get excited when you see accepting new patients only to be disappointed when you ring, and they tell you they are not.

The receptionist said that they are not allowed to update their website to let people know about the outrageously long queue, because they would then not be allowed by the NHS to be listed as an NHS practice.

### 3.3. Private Practice

Healthwatch Norfolk have received concerns from the public about the number of NHS dentists going private and offering private treatment, due to the lack of NHS provision.

Has anyone tried Registering as an NHS patient for a dentist Lately? I've phoned 15 Dentists within ten miles of me for help with a cracked tooth & Nothing. Just emails offering me immediate Private care instead.

Many dental practices would still register new private patients but were not being clear about the cost of treatment.

I have tried several dentists and none are taking on NHS patients. It's also not fair that they are offering private treatment but not giving any indication of cost.

Our findings suggest that patients are being told that although NHS appointments are not available, they can be treated privately, creating a real barrier for everyone, particularly for people on low incomes, to receive vital treatment.

As an unemployed student I have no financial support, no job, and do not qualify for Universal Credit. I cannot afford private treatment, nor do I have any family members that can help me.



When a patient's only option is to turn to private dental treatment, the cost is often incredibly expensive and unobtainable.

My son had emergency treatment last Sunday. He is on antibiotics and has been quoted £2000 for root canal and crown treatment, that he simply cannot afford.

There is also concern regarding the number of NHS dentists being forced into private practice.

Too many NHS dentists are being lost to private practice or emigration.

### 3.4. Frustration

A lack of access to dental services in Norfolk has understandably led to patients feeling incredibly frustrated about the situation.

In Norfolk, an area that covers 2000 square miles, there is not a single dentist accepting new NHS patients.

A lot of confusion and disbelief exists about why something has not been done sooner.

I'm so shocked that this issue hasn't seen more attention as I'm guessing it isn't just Norfolk having these issues. If I had a broken arm or nose or bladder infection etc I could make a simple stress-free call and expect to be seen within a couple of days at most... Why is having my painful dental issues dealt with been treated as though it's a luxury cosmetic treatment instead of a vital medical treatment that could result in further deterioration if left unchecked?

Patients are feeling unheard, angry, vulnerable and forgotten about.



My unmet needs are not registered anywhere, so I do not exist as a patient, and no one is counting me when considering service improvements.

Eventually a family member came to visit and after seeing how much distress I was in (and how many painkillers I was taking!) took me to A&E and finally after 3 days of suffering I was given an extraction and was advised to register with a regular dentist to deal with other less immediate issues with my teeth. The whole experience left me feeling unheard, frightened and vulnerable.

### 3.5. Government

Norfolk residents have tried reaching out to the local Government to complain about the lack of NHS dental provision but have been left feeling even more frustrated.

I have written to my MP who passed on my complaint to the Minister who replied to him with political waffle. I am aware that we can have a dentist at any location we remain with our dentist where we used to live roughly a two-hour drive from home a round trip of approximately 170 miles!

There have been reports of patients contacting their local MP and not receiving any productive or helpful advice and being passed around from one organisational department to another.

I eventually raised this with my Member of Parliament, George Freeman, who put me in touch with the local Commissioner for dental services, who suggested I go back to the website and phone each of the practices listed there. The response was still the same.

I then contacted the NHS England complaints service and spoke to someone who looked at his list of available places and recommended I contacted a practice in Kings Lynn - a round trip of 95-100 miles. When I pointed this out to him he said he didn't know the geography of this area and was unable to offer further help. I have raised this again with my MP and await his reply.



### 3.6. COVID-19

Dentistry has seen strict COVID disinfection protocols brought into place, which reduces the number of patients they can see. Following the easing of lockdown, we have received a high volume of feedback about dental services.

My wife and I moved to Norfolk 7 years ago we have been searching for an NHS Dentist to no avail. Last February one dentist had availability in Norwich (this was when covid was on the increase) and dentists were taking precautions, but as a country we were not locked down. I contacted them to be informed that we had to go to the surgery to register, but at that time we wouldn't be allowed to do so and there was no other provision.

The pandemic has made it difficult for most people to access both routine and emergency dental services, with many feeling unsure about when they would next see a dentist or leaving others to travel long distances to get care.

My 8-year-old daughter complained of a toothache last Wednesday night so Thursday morning I spent 2 hours on the phone calling over 20 dentists to get her an emergency appointment & failed! Even Siskin the 'emergency' dentist apparently didn't have a dentist working that day! She was registered at another dentist to then be told because she's not been in over a year (the year we've been in & out of lockdown) they took her off the books.

