

## Dental queries received by Healthwatch Cheshire Follow-up Report: April - December 2021



As part of our statutory role, Healthwatch Cheshire gather the views of local people on health, care and wellbeing. We feed back people's experiences and opinions to decision makers so that they can be used to plan, shape and improve local health and care services.

The number of people contacting us regarding NHS dentistry has remained high throughout 2021, and this follow-up report further details the queries and comments Healthwatch Cheshire are receiving. The report will be shared with individual dental providers and NHS England to ensure that people's voices are heard.

### Context

Since June 2020, Healthwatch Cheshire has received increasing numbers of enquiries asking for details of local dental practices taking on new NHS patients across Cheshire. Issues have included inaccurate information listed on the NHS England website, a lack of NHS appointments or treatment available, long waits or having to register with a dentist outside of Cheshire, concerns about the Cheshire and Merseyside Emergency Dental Helpline, and people being unable to access a dentist due to them being deemed inactive. In April 2021, Healthwatch published a report summarising the main issues raised by people in regard to dentistry. The report, along with all comments and feedback received, was shared with the individual dental providers, and NHS England who commission dentistry services. Healthwatch Cheshire have held regular meetings with the NHS England dentistry team in the North West, to raise the concerns shared with us by the public. Ahead of publication, our report has also been presented at the Cheshire West and Chester Council Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2021 and shared with the Cheshire East Council Public Health team. We have attempted to assist people through signposting and advice where appropriate, and have also been circulating NHS extra dental help leaflets to members of the public when on engagement activity so that they are aware what support is available.

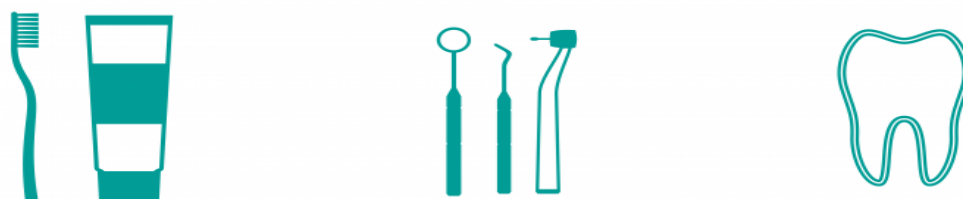
More about our work can be found at [www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk) and [www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk).

## Number of queries relating to dentists

The number of queries received by telephone, email or via our website relating to dentistry across all of Cheshire since April 2021 is detailed below:

- April - 11
- May - 13
- June - 19
- July - 24
- August - 38
- September - 39
- October - 46
- November - 16
- December - 15

These figures show an increase in enquiries month on month, possibly as more people have sought dental treatment as COVID-19 restrictions have loosened and people have increased confidence to take up appointments that they had been postponing due to concerns around the pandemic.



## Main issues

The issues raised in our previous report remain the main themes of people's comments and queries, but with a much greater focus on being unable to find an NHS dentist even though dental practices are accepting private patients. The majority of comments relate to this theme, and a sample of them are included later on in this report. The below considers the main issues raised in our last report, and how people are now raising them. Increasingly, there appears to be a greater knowledge and appreciation by people of these issues, and the main focus is on how these come together to create the main issue of people's concerns which is an inability to access an NHS dentist. A summary of these themes with a reflection on how they have developed in what people are telling us is included on the next page:

### Inaccurate information on NHS website

At the beginning of the Covid pandemic, details of dental practices on the NHS Services website were in many cases out of date, meaning that people needing treatment were forced to phone around individual practices to enquire about registering. Over the last few months some practices have updated their website entries, but it is clear many are not taking on new NHS patients and the majority have still not updated their information. When speaking to people, we are now being told that they are very aware that details on the NHS website may not be relied upon which means they are still therefore having to phone around Practices to ascertain whether or not they are taking on new patients.



### Convenience of access



Some people register with dentists in other counties, some are offered appointments in 5 or so months' time, some are told there is no waiting list and to keep calling back. Recently, we are told by people that they are still struggling to access NHS dentists when they contact practices outside of Cheshire. Others tell us that they do not think it is fair they should be made to travel and do not see why they should. An issue that has now been picked up on a few occasions is that families are being offered NHS appointments for children locally, but their parents are unable to access treatment at the same practice and have to seek treatment outside of Cheshire.

### Cheshire & Merseyside Dental Helpline

We have also been signposting people to the Cheshire & Merseyside Emergency Dental Helpline which deals with emergency dental enquiries for people who are not currently registered with a dentist in the area. Increasingly we were finding that the Helpline is unable to provide assistance for people. Since April, this has continued to some extent, with people reporting mixed experiences such as receiving good treatment, struggling to get through, or receiving partial treatment that serves to provide a temporary fix to the problem unless they pay for private treatment.



### Unable to access due to inactivity



There appears to be confusion around people being registered with dentists, and it is clear that further and better communication is needed around this process to the public. Some enquiries come from people new to the area or studying locally. Others are from people who have been unable to get an appointment with their dentist due to lack of recent attendance. Hearing from people, this appears to be the primary cause of needing to contact other NHS dentists in the first place, and feeds into the main problem of being unable to find an NHS dentist.

## NHS Practices turning private



Since December Healthwatch Cheshire has been receiving calls from people who have regularly been attending a dental practice only to be given notice that the practice has decided to stop taking on NHS work, and will be carrying out private work only. This is also adding to the pressure of finding NHS dental treatment locally.

Recent guidance from NHS guidance to NHS dental practices is that treatment should be prioritised against clinical need and priority groups regardless of whether or not a person has previously attended that Practice.

## **Lack of NHS appointments/treatment**

The most common queries we receive are from people struggling to find a dentist that will offer them NHS treatment, but will accept them as a private patient. The four main themes outlined on the previous page all play into this main issue in some way, with information on which dentists are accepting NHS patients not being up to date, people being forced to travel out of area, mixed experiences of the Emergency Dental Helpline, and people unable to access their previous dentist as they have not been for an appointment for a while. A selection of specific feedback from people is below:



- *“I am looking for a Dentist around [Chester] that will accept NHS/free treatment for me and my partner. Everywhere I look no one seems to be accepting new patients only private.”*
- *“I have today contacted 45 dental practices within a 10 mile radius (from the NHS website) but to no avail... all saying they only have a small NHS contract & therefore not taking on at present but would be happy to accept me as a private patient which is ironic... I am desperately seeking an NHS dentist simply because not only is it my right but also because I can't afford private treatment prices... I am in considerable pain with what I believe to be both a broken tooth and a cracked filling... hoping this email brings some results for my partner and I.”*
- *“I am trying to find a dentist in Crewe, Nantwich or even Sandbach that are taking on NHS patients. Not one person, unless I go private which I can't afford. I have broken my front plate of teeth and struggle eating which isn't good as I am a diabetic and need food. It's not right.”*
- *“I was wondering if you'd be able to tell me of any dentists that are taking on NHS patients in Macclesfield or Congleton as I'm struggling to find one. I've been to a private appointment today and found out I have gum disease and need some fillings etc. which I am unable to afford privately. Thank you.”*

- *“No dentists in my area are taking NHS patients. What am I supposed to do?”*
- *“I am struggling to find a local dentist to treat my daughter. She was attending Barnton Bupa dental care but I'm struggling to get there as it's quite far away. She has been referred by them to have four teeth removed. I am getting quite concerned that she is not getting the treatment that she needs.”*
- *“I am trying to find a local dentist in the Northwich area that are currently taking NHS patients - can you please advise?”*
- *“I am looking to register at a dentist in the Macclesfield area as an NHS patient. Unfortunately having used the NHS search site and contacted several dentists on the list I have been unsuccessful. Could you please inform me of any local dental practices who are willing to register adult NHS clients... or will I have to register as a private patient.”*
- *“I am emailing to see if you know of any dentists in the Macclesfield area that are currently taking on NHS patients as I cannot seem to find a practice that is taking on new patients.”*
- *“I have had difficulty finding a dentist who will treat me on the NHS for a filling. The filling has now broken and I cannot find a dentist to treat it.”*
- *“Since May 2020 until now, I have suffered two broken teeth and 4 lost fillings! I have tried and tried to find an NHS dental practice but to no avail, I have phoned countless dentists, dental helpline, dental choices.org etc but still I am unable to find anyone that can help me. I am also disabled and can only use a ground floor dentist or one with a lift to other floors as I have spinal injuries and I am unable to do stairs... I have tried at least 40+ dental practices getting further and further away from my home address, I do not mind travelling and I would even be happy travelling to the Dental Hospital in Manchester, which I have already used a few years ago for a mouth guard for my sleep apnoea, I don't know what to do now, I am desperate for help and have even contemplated trying DIY dental work but have for the moment decided against it... I don't mind if it is just to get my current dental problems sorted out and then find an NHS dentist to take me on as a regular patient later on. I cannot afford private care (wish I could) as I receive disability benefits and have an NHS exemption certificate.”*
- *“I am really struggling to find a local dental practice. I am in need of a root canal. Desperately. The pain is starting to have an effect on day to day life. I have had this pain for over a year with no luck of having successful treatment/relief. I am off work on maternity therefore I am exempt. I had an emergency appointment (who confirmed the treatment needed) at a surgery in Helsby but this is too far for me to travel with a new born baby. I was quoted over £400 for treatment which I cannot afford, even when I was*

*working full time. The practice (MyDentist) who quoted me this charged me for an assessment which I was unaware I would have to pay and also completed an X-ray while I was pregnant. I did tell them I wasn't happy they insisted I had this done but pressure was added until I agreed. I felt backed into a corner to agree. I have rang around several local surgeries to be told its private only at an extremely high rate or I need to call back in September. I have been on waiting lists since April last year and still haven't been contacted in regards to being seen."*

- *"I have been trying to get an NHS Dentist in Macclesfield without any luck for 6 months having moved into the area. Practice tell me this is an NHS issue not a practice decision. I am having to travel 50 miles round trip to return to my previous NHS dentist."*
- *"I'm looking to register myself, partner and our two children (both under two years of age) with a local dentist. I've called everywhere in Sandbach, Alsager, Holmes Chapel and Crewe and have been told by everyone that they are not accepting NHS patients at the moment and it could be the end of the year/beginning of next year when we could possibly register. Some practices will take the children on under the NHS but as adults we have to wait or pay for costly treatment as private patients. We are on a low income as I am currently on maternity leave so we cannot afford this. My partner has had to have emergency dental treatment twice during lockdown and has had to take unpaid time off work because of his dental problems."*
- *"I have been advised to contact you as I cannot find a single dentist in the whole of Macclesfield borough taking on NHS patients, please can you advise me on any dentists taking on NHS patients at the moment nearest to Bollington. My own dentist is going private completely so I need to find an NHS place for me and my son."*
- *"I live in Middlewich and struggling to find an NHS dentist. Are you aware of any practices taking on new patients for myself and my wife?"*
- *"I am trying to find a dentist to take me under the NHS but I can't seem to find anyone at all. Can you please advise as to who is taking on NHS as they all seem to just want to take on private. I'm based in Crewe, Cheshire."*
- *"I've been trying to find an NHS dentist for approximately 18 months since moving to a new area. I cannot find one accepting new patients. I am now pregnant so even more keen to find one ASAP. Are you able to help please? I called NHS England but couldn't get through to anyone."*
- *"My son is agony with toothache, he has been to see an emergency dentist who stated that he needs a root canal filling. He stated that he couldn't do this but would pull the tooth out if he wanted him to. My son declined this"*



*as he wants to save the tooth if possible - who wouldn't, once it's gone it's gone! We live in Middlewich and have tried several dentists in the area and beyond, but none are taking any new patients on, what do we do now please? It seems ridiculous that the only solution to stop the pain is to have the tooth pulled out, when in fact there is a solution to treat the tooth and save it."*

- *"I live in Chester and I am struggling to find an NHS Dentist. I have lived here for 5 years and have frequently contacted many listed on the NHS website and cannot find one to register with. With it being so long since I've been able to visit a dentist, I am worried about my teeth and suspect I need a filling, but can't afford the costs of registering as a private patient. What is the best way to register with an NHS Dentist?"*
- *"I was wondering whether you have a current list of Dentists near to Ellesmere Port, who are taking on NHS patients? I have been unsuccessful so far and think I have rung all the Dentists in Ellesmere Port. I was taken off the register at Sutton Dental Practice, without my knowledge. I therefore had to attend an Emergency Clinic Appointment in Bootle last week. I therefore need to find a new dentist quickly for subsequent check-ups and treatment."*
- *"I tried to contact the practice, was told by an automated response I was first in the queue, hung on for several minutes to then be told your call cannot be returned currently and the line went dead. Very unhelpful."*
- *"At the start of the pandemic I cancelled my appointment as I had had no jabs. I had my second jab in August so felt safe for another dental appointment but was told there weren't any for another 6 months at least. However, I thought I'd try again in November but was informed as it had been more than 2 years I was removed from the NHS and put on private. I've been at Harbour Dental Practice in Sandbach for 30 years and I have been thrown out for non attendance in 2 years when I couldn't get an appointment in 2 years. No one else is taking on and I can't believe how backwards we are. My teeth have been cared for since I was a child but now aged 67 I can't even get a check up. I've not been referred to a hygienist for years which I thought was because my teeth were OK but I have learnt that the hygienist is now private. This is unbelievable. Recently I saw the dental association helping children in Africa but how disgusting, when they don't care for us anymore."*
- *"It doesn't seem right to be penalized for making a major move out of the North East, in order to get a job; to be forced to go private right now is not an option we want to consider, and don't see why we should, having always been served by the NHS. Right now, it feels like the government is forcing us to seek private healthcare through the back door and I am really not happy."*

## Next steps

Healthwatch Cheshire are continuing to monitor queries regarding dentistry and encourage anybody with issues accessing a dentist to share their experience with us on our online Feedback Centre:

[www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk)

[www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk)

Our findings and reports are fed into Healthwatch England to help build up a national picture of the situation. In October 2021, Healthwatch England and the British Dental Association sent an open letter addressed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for a recovery plan for NHS dentistry, citing evidence from local Healthwatch across the country. We share all comments and feedback with individual dental providers locally, and also NHS England who commission dentistry services. We have held meetings with the NHS England dentistry team in the North West, to raise the concerns shared with us by the public, including in this and our previous report. NHS England are fully aware of the concerns, and have explained the circumstances as to why some of them occur, helping us to better understand the system. They are currently working towards resolving these issues and dental contracts are being reviewed. We will continue to work together using regular meetings and contact to raise concerns and provide feedback.

## Further Information



We advise callers that if they are experiencing bleeding, swelling or pain to their mouth they should call NHS 111 for triage, or call the Emergency Dental Helpline on 0161 476 9651.

Healthwatch Cheshire are meeting with NHS England dentistry leads to discuss the issues raised by people.

If you have any queries regarding this report or would like to talk to us regarding support, please contact:

**Email:** [info@healthwatchcheshire.org.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchcheshire.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 0300 323 0006