



# Accessing NHS dental care in Dorset

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February 2022

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# Introduction

## About us

Healthwatch Dorset is the county's health and social care champion. We listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are independent and impartial, and your feedback is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.



## What people have told us

COVID-19 has brought challenges to the delivery of health and care services. We have been tracking how this is affecting people in Dorset, and we wanted to highlight an area of real concern – dentistry. We have seen a spike in enquiries about accessing NHS dental care; over half of all our enquiries between July and September 2021 were about this issue.

People have told us that they could not find an NHS dentist in the county for urgent and routine appointments. We heard from several people with ongoing pain and unresolved dental issues because they have not been able to access treatment through the emergency dental hubs or through an NHS dentist. Delays have caused significant pain, inconvenience and worsening dental problems requiring further treatment.

Since we carried out the research presented in this report, we have continued to receive enquiries from people struggling to get dental care in Dorset, and, in the last six months, enquiries have increased from people trying to get NHS dental treatment for their children.



**“I have been unable to find a dentist who will take me on as an NHS patient. I have had ongoing infection and pain, to the point of requiring emergency care recently, which was a scary experience, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on NHS staff to witness.”**



## Healthwatch England research

In December 2021, Healthwatch England reported that: [Recovery of NHS dental care is too slow to help thousands left in pain](#). Their research shows that public feedback to local Healthwatch on NHS dental care, has risen five-fold over the last 18 months, compared to pre-pandemic levels. It also highlights that findings from other data sources mirror what people have been telling us about accessing NHS dental care.

Some dental practices have either shut down or have gone fully private. Some dentists have used up their total NHS capacity and are asking people for private fees instead. Many people find it hard to get up-to-date information about which practices are taking on new patients because NHS and dentists' websites aren't updated regularly. As a result, more people are contacting their local Healthwatch hoping that they can provide them with accurate information.

It is often the most vulnerable people in our society, including children, disabled people and those living in care homes, who are suffering the most. Healthwatch England Chair, Sir Robert Francis QC, said: "The big worry about the shortage of NHS appointments leading people to private care is that it further deepens the health inequalities that COVID-19 has starkly highlighted. We won't build back a fairer service until access to NHS dentistry is equal and inclusive for everyone."

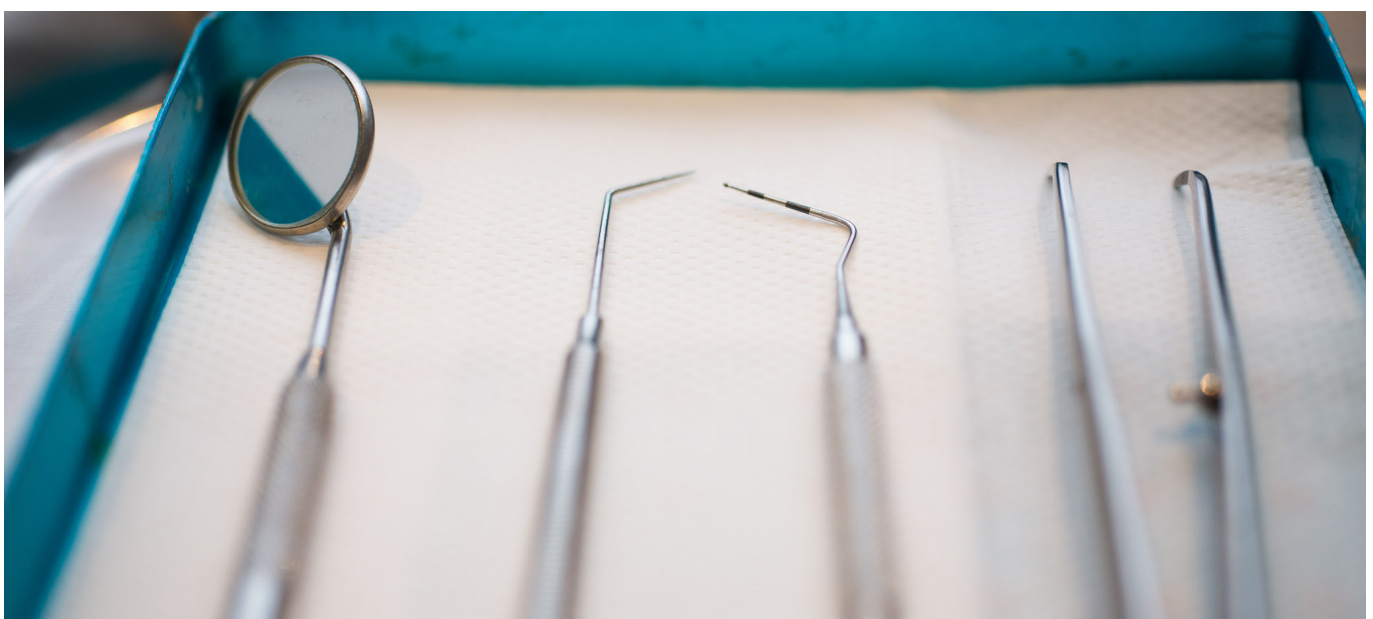
## What we did

We wanted to understand more about why people are having difficulty getting the dental care they need in Dorset. From September to November 2021, a team of our volunteers called every one of the 99 NHS registered dental practices in Dorset, asking the following questions:

- Are you registering new NHS patients?
- Do you have a waiting list? If so, how long is the waiting list?
- Are you taking on new NHS patients that are children?
- Are you taking on new NHS patients that are pregnant?
- Are you taking on new NHS patients that are having or finishing cancer treatment?
- Are existing patients having normal routine appointments/check-ups?
- Are you accepting NHS 111 referrals?

This report presents our findings on the provision of dental treatment in Dorset at the end of 2021, for registered and unregistered people, and the experiences of those trying to register with an NHS dentist.

Through our engagement work with Dorset's homeless community, we have also gained insight the challenges they face accessing dental care.



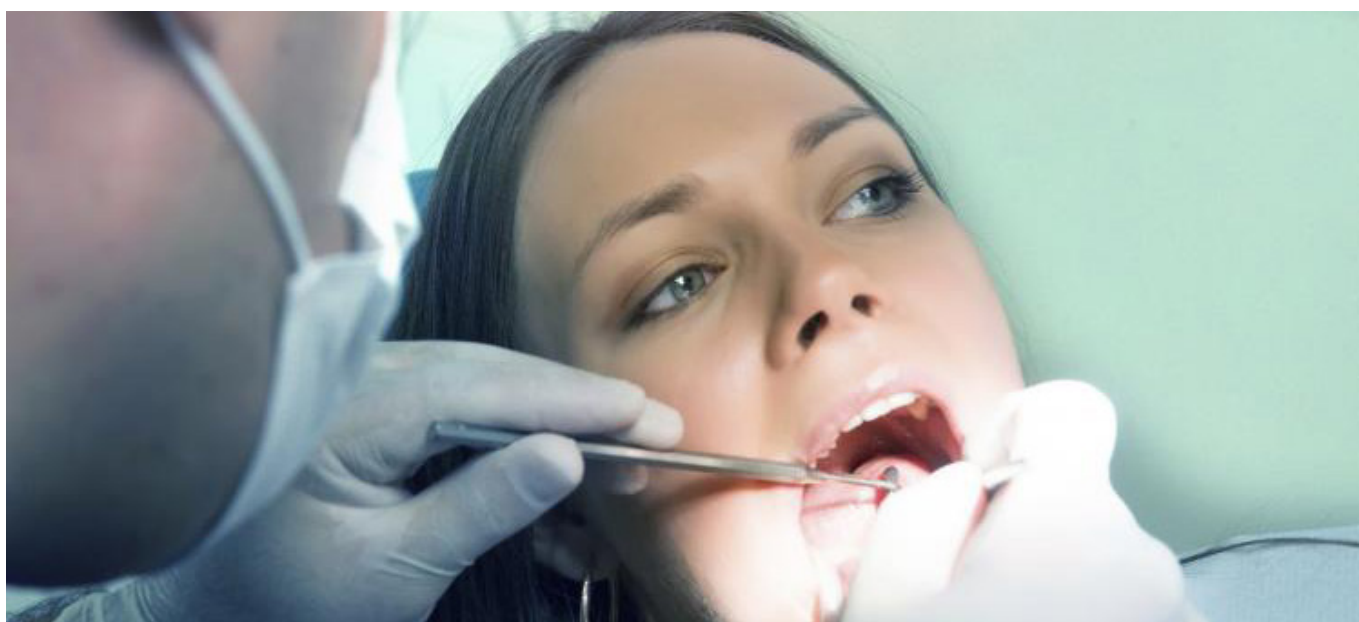
# Key findings

We contacted all of the 99 NHS dental practices in Dorset. 74 responded, six did not respond because they were no longer treating NHS patients, and 19 did not respond, despite being called three or more times and being sent a letter about the research. These are the findings from our snapshot research.

- Only three of the 74 dental practices who responded were taking on new NHS adult patients, though six said they were taking on new NHS patients who were pregnant.
- Only four practices said they were taking on new NHS patients who were being treated for cancer. Another five said they would see people receiving cancer treatment, but only if they were referred and/or had additional needs, for example, a disability or diagnosed mental health condition, under the discretion of the dentist.
- Only 13 practices were taking on children as new NHS patients, and two of those only in emergencies. A further seven said they would see children, but only if their parents were registered as private patients.
- Only 18 (25%) of the dental practices that responded had a waiting list for NHS patients; 48 (65%) did not. Waiting times varied and some practices did not know when they would open their waiting list.
- 66 (49%) of dental practices reached were seeing existing patients for routine appointments.



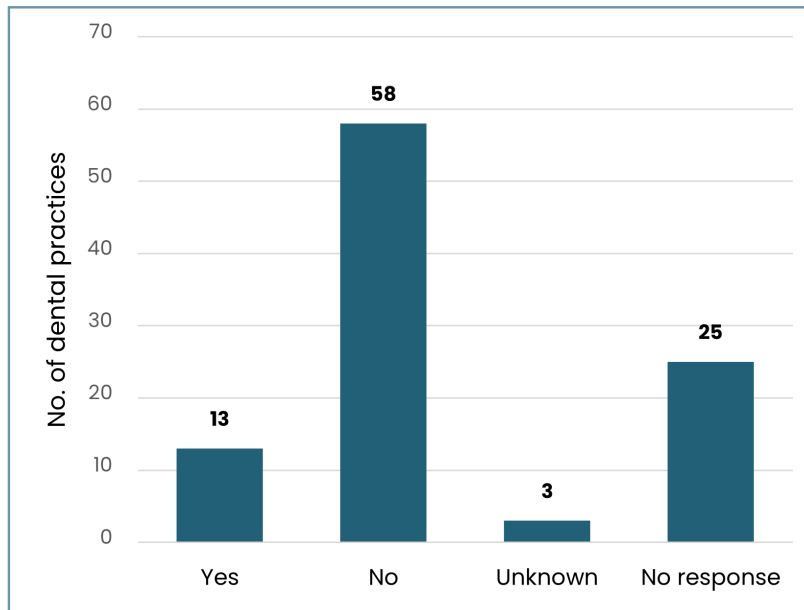
**“I had symptoms of a tooth infection/pain and called 111 for emergency dental care, who then transferred me and an appointment was made to visit a dentist. I was very grateful, saw a dentist, the tooth required antibiotics which were prescribed, but that was it in terms of NHS treatment. The dentist stated the tooth in question needs to be removed but I was told to find a private dentist as NHS treatment was not possible. That is money I do not have. I have been unable to work during the pandemic, home schooling etc. I feel this situation is not acceptable for a person’s health, wellbeing, and the pressure this causes re going into debt to pay for private dental treatment, when it appears impossible to have NHS dental treatment.”**



# The data

There were 99 dental practices in Dorset listed on the NHS website; only three of the 74 that responded told us they were accepting new NHS patients at the time.

**Figure 1: Are you taking on new NHS patients that are children?**

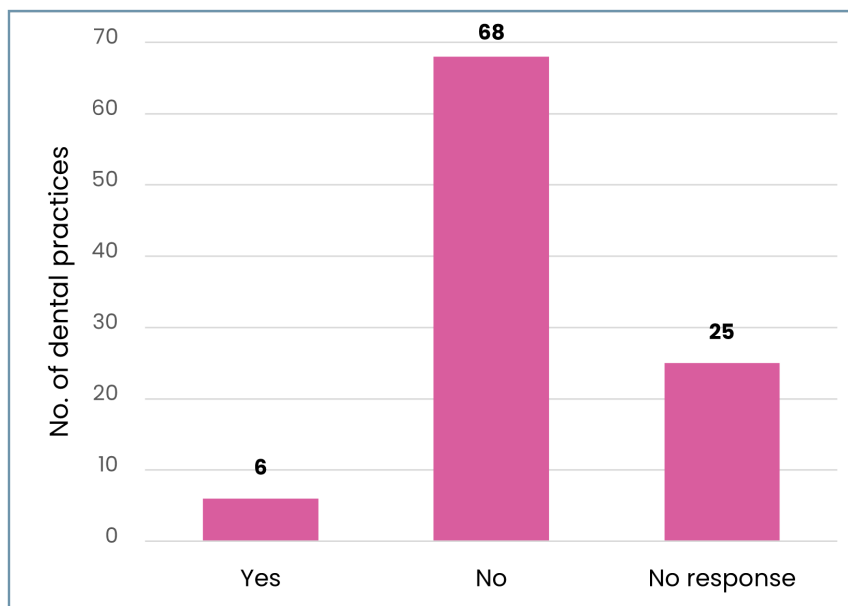


"I am really struggling to find a dentist that is willing to take on my daughter as an NHS patient (she is two and a half). I have tried my own dentist which is refusing to take her on despite the fact I am registered. All other surgeries I've tried are taking private patients only."

"My daughter needs to go to the dentist and the only way I seem to be able to do this is to pay extortionate private fees. The local provision of NHS dentistry is clearly not enough."



**Figure 2: Are you taking on new NHS patients that are pregnant?**



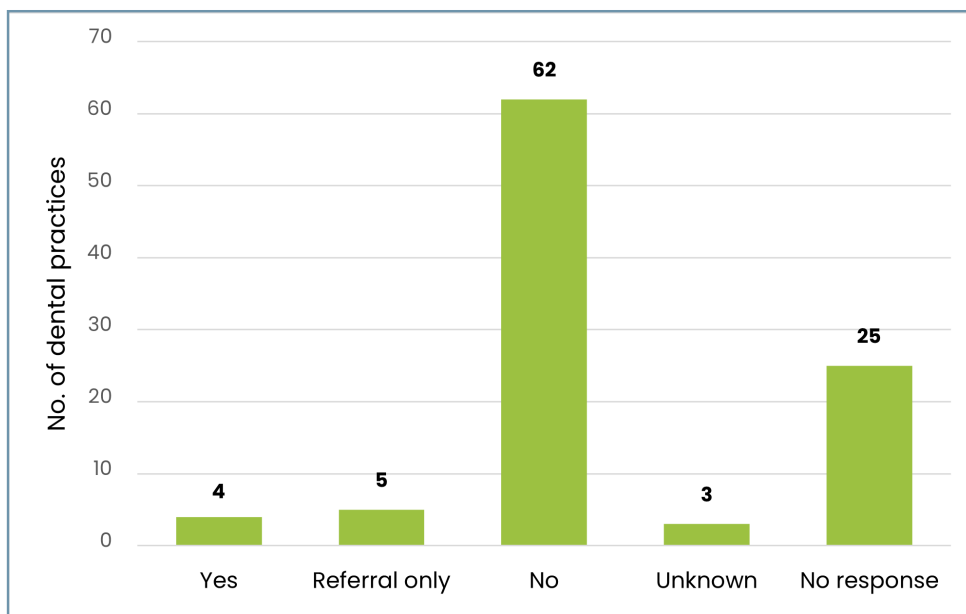


“I have been trying for ages to find a dentist taking on NHS patients. I am eight months pregnant and really in need of a check-up. I am worried pregnancy is having an impact despite how seriously I take oral hygiene, I have always had weak teeth.”

“I contacted my dentist to make an appointment but was told they had taken me off their caseload as I had not attended for a period of time. I am a nurse working full-time, currently pregnant, and have not had time during COVID to book an appointment and thought the practice should’ve given me notice of terminating me from their books.”



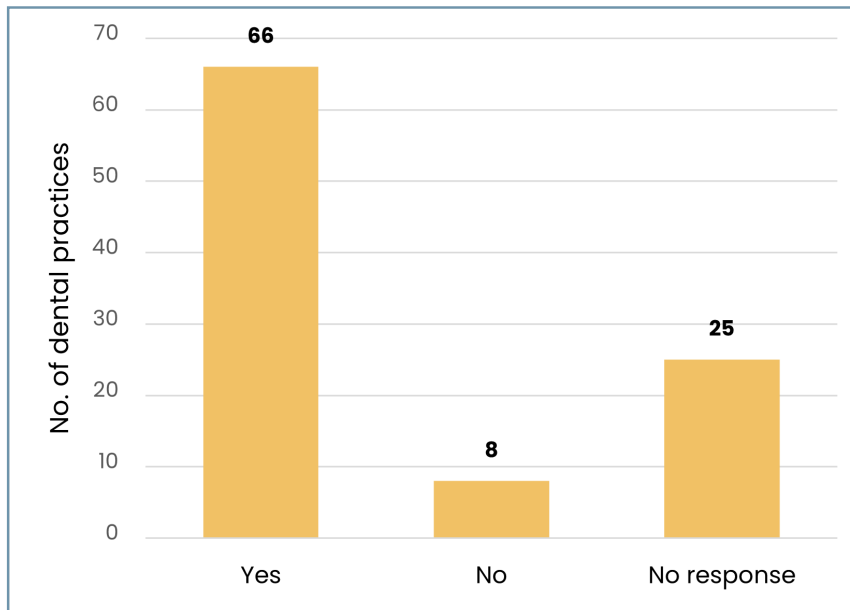
**Figure 3: Are you taking on new NHS patients that are having or finishing cancer treatment?**



“My son (aged 19) has been searching for a dentist, he has contacted the NHS number and there seems to be no one taking on NHS patients. He has just finished chemotherapy for cancer, and been left with sore gums and would like to have a routine check-up and advice, but it seems he is unable and has been told by NHS 111 it’s not classed as an emergency. It’s pretty appalling really.”



**Figure 4: Are existing patients having routine appointments/check-ups?**



**“We are working with a 62 year old client who has multiple health problems. He was with an NHS dentist prior to Coronavirus but because he has not attended the dental surgery for two years, he has been removed from their list. During the pandemic he has been losing teeth and is now without six of his front teeth. Understandably, he is having difficulty chewing his food, which is exacerbating his stomach problems. He has been unable to find an NHS dentist willing to take him on, his only income is from benefits so he cannot afford a private dentist.”**

Feedback from a local Citizen Advice Bureau



**Figure 5: Are you accepting NHS 111 referrals?**

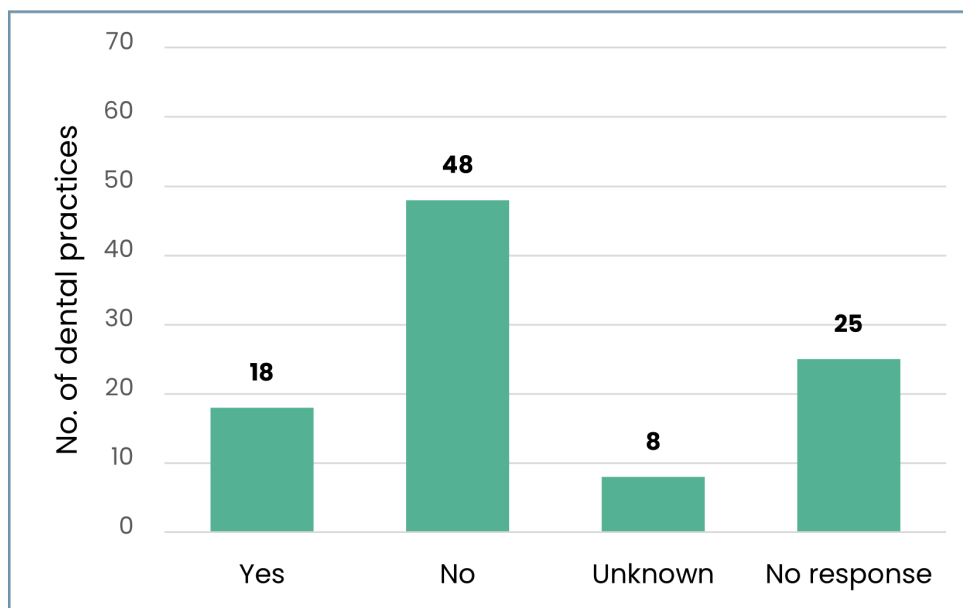
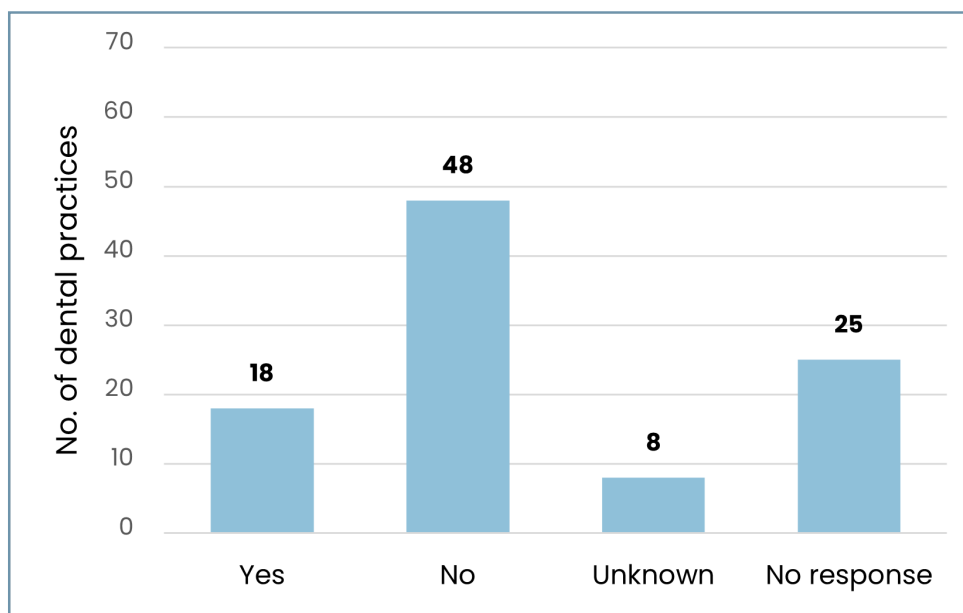




Figure 6: Do you have a waiting list?



## Case study: Providing dental care to the homeless community

### HealthBus

The [HealthBus](#) supports people experiencing homelessness in Bournemouth. They have seen a growing need for specialised dental treatment for the homeless population they support. Most weeks do not pass without one or more of their patients needing urgent dental treatment. The challenges faced by people who are homeless often prevent them from being able to access mainstream dental services. No fixed address, no mobile phone, no money, limited mobility, as well as lack of service provision in the Bournemouth area, means that many people sleeping rough or in temporary emergency accommodation have not seen a dentist for many years.



The Dentaid team in Bournemouth (credit Dentaid)

### Dentaid

[Dentaid](#) provides free dental care to homeless and vulnerable people in the UK and overseas. The charity uses mobile dental clinics to visit hostels, day centres and night shelters to provide emergency aid to those who cannot access dental care themselves. They aim to tackle the staggering 70% of homeless people who have issues with their oral health, as well as educate children on the importance of good dental care (source: Dentaid).

The Dentaid charity provides free dental screening, advice and treatment to people who aren't registered for NHS dental care. Dentaid has been supporting homeless clients in Bournemouth, through HealthBus, since March 2021, but funding was limited and scheduled to run out at the end of 2021.

## Phil's story

Phil found it difficult trying to access dental treatment which he desperately needed. He had been homeless for 18 years and as a result his teeth have suffered badly. When his dental problems began, he started using superglue because it covers the nerves and stops the pain. Phil said that the more glue you put in, the less you can clean your teeth and the problems just get worse.

Since coming back to Bournemouth, Phil had to wait six months to see a dentist. At first, he was told that he needed to go to the hospital to have X-rays as the dentist was unable to carry out any treatment before seeing these. It then took six weeks for the X-rays to be sent as Phil was told that he would have to request them via email, which he was unable to do. Phil found this frustrating and said: "if you haven't got access to modern technology then the doors get closed." Phil had to ask his Social Worker to request the X-rays on his behalf. These were then sent to his doctor, who forwarded them to the HealthBus. This whole process took six weeks, whilst Phil was suffering from multiple infections and was in extreme pain and unable to eat properly.

Phil then saw Dentaaid, a charitable organisation who visit the HealthBus every other month and provide dental treatment to the clients they support. Dentaaid were unable to provide any treatment at this appointment due to the amount of superglue on Phil's teeth, so they booked him an appointment to receive treatment in two months' time.

Phil managed to remove most of the glue and his bridge himself, but when he had his second appointment, he was told that there was so much infection that they would need to pull his teeth out. He had six teeth removed during this appointment. Phil has now recovered, the infection is completely clear, and the pain has subsided.

Phil recently had another appointment with the Dentaaid team to take impressions of his mouth so that he can have dentures. These were fitted by the Dentaaid team in November 2021. When asked what Phil thought about Dentaaid, he said "they treated me as though I was someone paying privately, they were so kind."



# Our recommendations

- People would benefit from clear information about dental provision. Better communication with people and information sharing from local practices would help the community navigate dental care. This is especially important as most dentists that we spoke to are not anticipating opening their waiting lists this year. The public needs to be given clear reasons why access to NHS dentists is limited in this way.
- NHS commissioners and dental practitioners should make more provision for people who are suffering from urgent dental problems.
- All NHS dentists should be advised to make NHS places available for children, without restrictions.
- All NHS dentists should be advised and funded to provide NHS places for people who are pregnant and/or undergoing cancer treatment.
- The charity Dentaaid is providing an invaluable service to people experiencing homelessness through the HealthBus and we recommend that the service continues to be funded to provide a local service.
- Healthwatch England has called on the Government and NHS England to speed up dental contract reform and provide significant and sustained funding to tackle the underlying problems of dental access and affordability ([Recovery of NHS dental care too slow to help thousands left in pain | Healthwatch, Dec 2021](#)).



## Next steps

We are sharing this report with Dorset NHS commissioners and providers, local Councils, the Dorset Local Dental Committee, South West Dental Commissioning Team and NHS England to highlight the difficulties faced by people trying to access NHS dentistry across Dorset. We have also shared our report with Healthwatch England to support their ongoing call for reform of dental care.

## Stakeholder response

On 25 January 2022, NHS England announced £50 million of funding to secure up to 350,000 additional NHS dental appointments by the end of March 2022. We welcome the funding and we are pleased that children, people with learning disabilities, autism, or severe mental health problems will be prioritised for treatment. However, ongoing reform is required, and we look forward to working with NHS England to help them improve access to NHS dentistry for local people.

**Chief Dental Officer for England, Sara Hurley, said:** “Dental services are a vital part of the NHS providing oral health care to all age groups, and that’s why we have taken this unprecedented action to boost NHS dental services.”



**Jacob Lant, Head of Policy at Healthwatch England, said:** “This is a vital injection of money and will help tackle the spiralling crisis in dental access and affordability. We are particularly pleased to see NHS England prioritising appointments for vulnerable people, including children, with many missing school and suffering in pain as a result of dental problems that were entirely preventable through routine care. There still remains deeper and more systemic challenges in the dental sector that have been laid bare over the last two years, but we need to build from this and start to get the nation’s oral health back on track after this dreadful pandemic.”



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank those who shared their experiences with us about dental care in Dorset. Without you, we would not be able to do the work that we do. We would also like to thank our dedicated volunteers for phoning each dental practice. Special thanks go to Phil who shared his story with us.

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