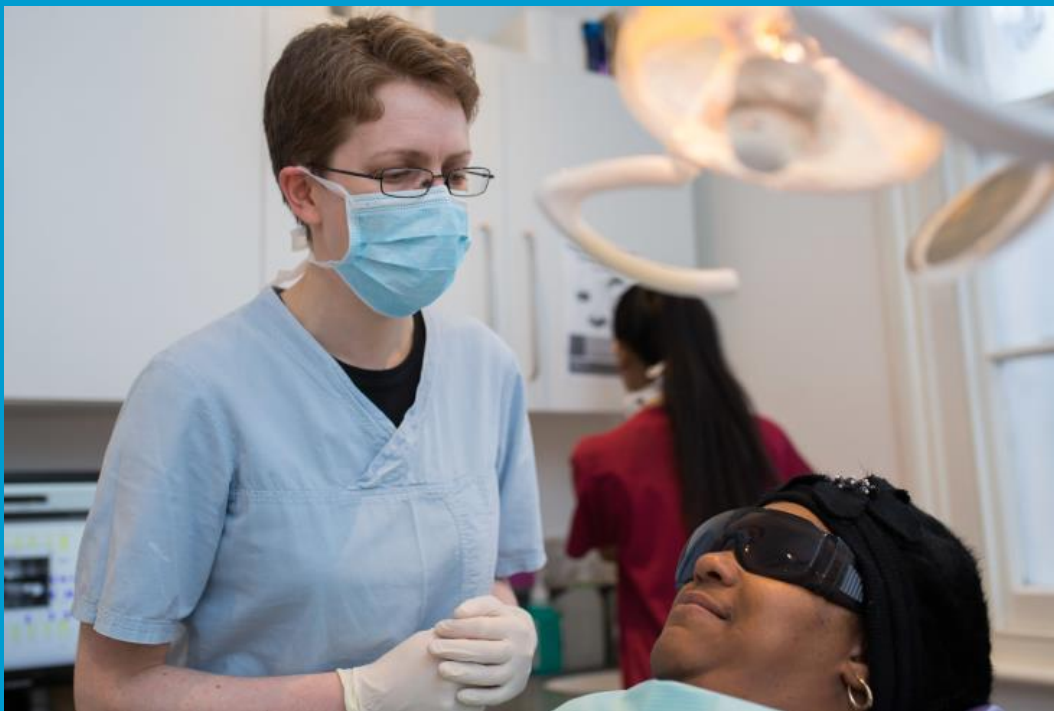


Accessing dentistry in Rotherham

A report looking into Rotherham dentistry between December 2020 and December 2021



About us

We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Rotherham. We are here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

Our sole purpose is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf. We focus on ensuring that peoples’ worries and concerns about current services are addressed and work to get services right for the future.

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Summary

Healthwatch Rotherham conducted this report due to the vast amount of enquiries we have received relating to dentistry over the past 12 months. This report is a general overview of what Rotherham residents have found when trying to find a dentist in Rotherham, or when trying to book an appointment with their existing dentist.

We collected data from a number of sources and these were online surveys, previous enquiries and case studies, and speaking directly to dental practises. We had 279 responses to our online survey which ran between December 2021 and January 2022. This was shared with contacts from our mailing list as well as on social media. The survey looked at appointment wait times, registering with a Rotherham dentist and patient satisfaction.

The report found that **70.3%** of participants are currently registered with an NHS dentist in Rotherham. **88%** of these have tried to book an appointment with their dentist in the last 12 months, with **83.3%** being successful.

66.4% of unregistered patients have attempted to register with an NHS dentist in Rotherham. Only **22.8%** of these were successful, meaning **77.2%** of patients have been left without a dentist, and therefore with no appointment. The majority of appointments were for check-ups. The latest NHS stakeholder update states that patients can wait up to 24 months before requiring a check-up, and that urgent appointments will be prioritised, which can explain why there are such long wait-times.

We also contacted each dentist in Rotherham, and out of the 18 we contacted, 16 of these were not accepting new patients. Many did not have a waiting list and for those that did, they were up to 2 ½ years long. Only one dental practice's information was correctly listed on the NHS 'Find a Dentist' tool, with 7 stating they were taking on new patients, when in fact they were not.

We understand the difficulties facing dentistry now, and the long road ahead for practises as they try to cope with waiting lists and staff shortages. We recommend clearer communication with the public from dental practises as well as the NHS, highlighting what to do if you have dental pain, how to keep good oral hygiene and the misconceptions of registering with a dentist. We also recommend the NHS 'Find a dentist' tool to be regularly updated to ensure that information for patients is up to date at all times, relieving some frustration patients are facing when trying to find a dentist.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, dentistry has suffered due to the nature of their work and the equipment used; requiring them to be in close proximity to patients' airways for treatments. Due to this, dental services were not permitted to see patients face to face at the start of the pandemic which has led to a backlog of patients needing treatment.

Healthwatch Rotherham has been aware of ongoing issues surrounding accessing dentistry nationwide, with our focus being on the impact it is having on Rotherham residents. Since the pandemic began, we have noticed a large increase in enquiries surrounding dentistry. Some patients were struggling to get a dentist appointment despite being in severe amounts of pain, and many unregistered patients were really struggling to find a dentist to register with. This led to patients being left untreated and in pain, resulting in them doing their own dental work as a last resort.

As we begin to adjust to the 'new normal' and restrictions ease, we have been seeing services opening their doors again to see higher numbers of patients both online and face to face. Despite this, we are still seeing large numbers of residents who cannot obtain a dentist appointment, and more so, register with a dentist in Rotherham.

With limited information and resources, we were advised to recommend NHS 111 to patients in an emergency, and to direct everyone else to the NHS website <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist>. This resource highlights all the dentists in your local area, and also whether they are taking on

new patients or not. It was noted that from the enquiries we were receiving from residents that some dentists that stated they were taking on new patients on the NHS website, were in fact not.

We decided to investigate this by contacting all of the dentists in Rotherham to find out if they were taking on new patients or not. The results of this can be found below in our findings.

Updates from services:

Most recent stakeholder update - January 2022:

“Practices have been asked to continue to prioritise patients with the greatest need into their available NHS treatment capacity. Those requiring urgent dental care and vulnerable patients are prioritised, which likely means a delay for patients seeking an appointment for non-urgent treatment. NHS England continues to support dental providers across the region to resume regular NHS dental services safely and effectively and in accordance with the advice set out by the Chief Dental Officer” (Stakeholder update for dentistry in North East England and Yorkshire).

The advice to patients is:

- If your teeth and gums are healthy - a check-up, or scale and polish may not be needed for up to 24 months
 - When you come into the surgery for an appointment, please remember that social distancing remains in place and you will still need to wear a face mask upon entering the practice.
 - The infection control process for dentistry has not changed with the lifting of COVID19 restrictions - masks and hand hygiene measures are still required.

January 2022:

- It's important that dental practises continue to follow this guidance as they are a healthcare setting and they are doing all they can to ensure your safety when you come to the practice.
- Every dental practice is working extremely hard to provide care to patients within the restrictions and guidance - please be respectful at all times.
- All NHS dental practises are following the guidance, and private dental practises are recommended to follow them by the health regulator, the Care Quality Commission.
- Similar public health measures are still in place for hospitals and GP practises too. Advice is that the infection prevention control measures in dentistry should continue to be followed until further notice.
- Dental practises will continue to have restrictions on leaving time between patients to ventilate rooms - this has an impact on how many patients they are able to see each day.
- All dental practises are prioritising patients for treatment based on urgency and priority groups, such as those more at risk of dental disease or children.

25th January 2022:

It was announced that NHS dental care services have been boosted with a £50 million funding injection. This will allow more people access to vital dental care when they need it, and will prioritise children, people with learning disabilities, autism or severe mental health problems. It is believed this funding will secure up to 350,000 additional dental appointments. Out of the funding provided, the North East and Yorkshire received the second highest amount of £8.63 million.¹

¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2022/01/hundreds-of-thousands-more-dental-appointments-to-help-recovery-of-services/>



Method

We decided to investigate dentistry in Rotherham and residents' experiences of using or finding a dentist. We felt the best method to do this, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was online using a survey. The survey was created using Google Forms and distributed via our Facebook and Twitter pages to try and target Rotherham residents on the 8th December 2021. After an initial low response before Christmas, it was decided that the survey should then be distributed to all contacts on our newsletter mailing list, which included a variety of local services, who were encouraged to complete the form themselves, as well as distribute to clients and service users. This resulted in a huge increase in responses, and when the survey was closed on Monday 10th January 2022, we had 279 responses.

The survey was only short, comprising 8 closed questions, to ensure it did not take up too much of resident's time, resulting in more people willing to participate and therefore a higher response rate. Next time, we will include an open question at the end for people to add any extra comments should they wish, which would add to our data.

We asked a variety of questions to try and establish a fair analysis of the situation. Residents were asked whether they were currently registered with an NHS dentist, whether they have tried to book an appointment in the past 12 months, whether they were successful in booking an appointment, how long they had to wait for an appointment and the reason for booking an appointment in the first place. We wanted to see whether people who needed emergency appointments were being seen quickly, and whether those registered with a dentist were able to get appointments easier than those who weren't registered. We decided to limit the focus to the past 12 months, to ensure the data we were getting was up to date, and focused on the time period during the pandemic, as we noted this is when the dentistry situation began to deteriorate.

The survey findings were then analysed and can be found below.

In addition to a survey, we also decided to contact all dental surgeries in Rotherham to ascertain whether they were taking on new patients or not, and whether this matched with the NHS 'Find a Dentist' website tool. We rang up in the same way a patient would, using the contact number provided on the website, and noted the outcome of the conversation. The results of this can also be found below in the 'Findings' section.

Findings

“Patients registered with an NHS dentist were more successful in booking an appointment than those who weren’t registered”

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have noticed an increase in dentist complaints. We have found in Rotherham that these are mainly from residents not registered with an NHS dentist. We have also found that many of the dental updates from NHS Commissioners focused on patients who were already registered with a dentist, with a lack of updates for unregistered patients, leaving many feeling frustrated.

Our findings showed that 70.3% of participants (196 people) are currently registered with an NHS dentist in Rotherham. 88% of these have tried to book an appointment with their dentist in the last 12 months. Out of the 88%, 83.3% of those were successful at booking an appointment with their dentist, with just 16.7% being unsuccessful.

Compare this with unregistered patients, and the story looks quite different. Out of the unregistered patients, 66.4% have attempted to register with an NHS dentist in Rotherham in the past 12 months. Only 22.8% of these were successful in registering with an NHS dentist in Rotherham. A huge 77.2% of those who attempted to register with a dentist were unsuccessful. This means that 77.2% of patients have not been able to book a non-emergency appointment with a dentist in Rotherham. This can result in delayed treatment, and long-term problems occurring.

Time taken to get a dentist appointment:

The time taken to get a dentist appointment varied, with the most common answers being:

Three months - 28 (16.6%)

One month - 27 (16%)

7 days or less - 27 (16%)

2-3 weeks - 25 (14.8%)

Two months - 20 (11.8%)

1-2 weeks - 20 (11.8%)

Other, less popular answers included next day emergency appointments, 6 month routine check-ups and some people were not able to book at all and were therefore still waiting at the time of writing.

We did not ask for specific dental surgeries when discussing waiting times, therefore we have not identified which surgeries have shorter wait times than others.. Many people have been left in pain, unable to get a next day emergency appointment through a dentist or NHS 111, and as we have seen in the national news, they have resorted to performing their own dental treatment.²

As mentioned in the stakeholder update, the advice to patients is that if your teeth and gums are healthy, a check-up may not be needed for up to 24 months, with practises prioritising urgent treatment. This can explain some of the reasons behind such long waits for appointments.

² <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/health/norfolk-no-nhs-dentists-8410002>

It should be noted however that not being able to get a routine check-up for 2 years when patients are used to having them every six months, may result in issues not being picked up in time, leading to future issues for patients that could have been avoided.

Stakeholder update - January 2022

Out of hours care:

- Toothache should initially be managed with over the counter pain relief until an appointment can be made with your general dental practice. A pharmacist can advise you what the best pain control is to meet your needs.
- Lost fillings, crowns or bridges, broken teeth or braces are **not usually** deemed to be clinically urgent and patients are advised to contact their local dental practice when they re-open.
- Only ring NHS 111 out of hours when your dental needs cannot be met by self-care and cannot wait until your regular practice - if you have one - is open to contact them for advice.

Appointment reason:

The majority of appointments were check-ups.

Check-up - 135 (66.8%)

Filling - 39 (19.3%)

Broken tooth - 7 (3.5%)

Root Canal - 5 (2.5%)

Other answers included loose teeth, jaw pain, gum disease, wisdom tooth infection/removal and abscesses.

Satisfaction of obtaining a dentist appointment:

The satisfaction of obtaining a dentist appointment in Rotherham varied significantly. Unsurprisingly, those who could obtain an appointment with ease were very satisfied with the process (40.8%), compared with 23.9% of respondents who were very unsatisfied with being able to book an appointment, with some still unable to book one now. These figures will also account for those unable to even register with a dentist, meaning they have been unable to access a dentist appointment at all, whether that is emergency or routine.

Full results:

Very satisfied - 82 (40.8%)

Very unsatisfied - 48 (23.9%)

Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied - 27 (13.4%)

Slightly satisfied - 24 (11.9%)

Slightly unsatisfied - 18 (9%)

Case studies:



As well as using some examples from enquiries we have had over the past 12 months, we also put a call out on our social media for Rotherham residents to come forward and share their experiences with dentistry in Rotherham, whether that is positive or negative.

One respondent told us:

“I am not registered with a dentist as I moved back to the area late 2019 and didn't register with a dentist before Covid. I did try to register with a dentist in 2020 but they weren't taking anyone. Last week my filling fell out. I looked online for a local dentist that is taking emergency patients. When I spoke to them they said they were not taking new patients or emergency appointments. I was told there is a two year waiting list. They also suggested I bought a DIY filling kit as my tooth is broken. I don't want to be trying to fill the tooth myself because if I do anything wrong I can't get a dentist to fix it.

I tried another dentist whose website said they were taking new patients. They told me on the phone it was again a two year waiting list. Both of these dentists told me the best thing to do was to phone around the dentists to see who was taking patients. One even suggested trying outside my area. I am feeling very upset about the situation. I know I should be spending time phoning around all the local dentists but I can't take rejection after rejection. I shall keep trying but I am not feeling very hopeful”.

Enquiries:

“I have been given your email as a contact point as I am unable to access NHS dental care in my area. Each practice I have contacted has informed me they are not currently taking on any NHS patients. I lost a filling in a back tooth in August and it is causing some discomfort and pain. I have contacted NHS111 but have been advised it is not serious enough to receive urgent treatment I am despairing as to how I am ever going to get the tooth filled and I will eventually develop an abscess under it”.

“I have approximately 6 months with toothache but I do not have a dentist of mine I am on the waiting list. I went to emergency clinics three times after I called 111 but I did not receive any kind of service, and for me it has become impossible to continue with toothache all day and all night”.

“I have been trying to find a dentist I can get to for over two years I did find one over 3 hours away but was taken off their books after I was late due to a bus being late”.

“I have been trying to get registered at a nearby dentist for quite a few months now with no success”.

“I am concerned for the future of NHS patients. I realise private patients are given preferential treatment, that is what they pay obscene amounts of money for. However, the rest of us should not be made to feel less of a person; we still pay for our treatment. We need more NHS dentists!”



Dentists accepting new patients:

On the NHS 'Find a Dentist' toolkit, there is a useful tool where you can find local dental practices near you, and this has also highlighted which practices are taking on new patients.³

We have directed clients to this toolkit, in the hope that this would reduce the time spent by them trying to find a practice, but wanted to know how accurate it actually was.

We decided to contact each practice in Rotherham listed, and find out whether they were taking on new patients or not, and compare this to what is written on the NHS website.

Results:

³ <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist>

Name of practice	Taking on new NHS patients as stated on the NHS 'Find a Dentist' tool	Taking on new NHS patients when contacted via telephone (January 2022)
Ivy Cottage Dental Care	Yes - both adults and children	No (hoping to resume in April)
Mydentist, Doncaster Road	Yes - both adults and children	No (waiting list 18 months - 2 years)
M A Foster Dental Practice	Only accepting referrals	No
Royd House Dental Surgery	Only accepting referrals	No
Mydentist, Effingham Square	Yes - both adults and children	No - (waiting list 2 years)
R Joseph, Joseph Family Dental Care	Only accepting referrals	No
R Joseph, Broom Road Dental Care	Only accepting referrals	Yes (5 months waiting list)
R Joseph, Ferham Road	No recent update given	No
Stag Dental Care	No recent update given	No
Kimberworth Park Dental Practice	Yes- both adults and children	No (re-opening March 2022)
Dalton Dental Care	Yes - both adults and children	Yes - March 2022 onwards
R Joseph, Brinsworth Dental Surgery	No recent update given	No
Mydentist, Brinsworth Lane	Not taking on new patients	No
Rawmarsh Dental Practice	Not taking on new patients	No
Bramley Dental Practice	Yes - both adults and children	No
Thorpe Hesley Dental Practice	No recent update	No
Fitzwilliam Street Dental Care	Yes - both adults and children	No - private patients only
Thurcroft Dental Practice	Yes - both adults and children	No (waiting list of 2 ½ years)

18 dental practises in Rotherham were contacted in total.

8 dental practises in Rotherham were advertised as accepting both adult and children NHS patients on the NHS 'Find a Dentist' tool.

Out of these 8 practises, 7 of these confirmed they were in fact not accepting new patients when we telephoned.

Only one practice's information was correctly listed on the website as accepting new patients, with a waiting list of two months.

In total, 16 of the dental practises contacted were not accepting new NHS patients. Many did not even have a waiting list as demand was already too high with existing patients. Waiting list length varied from 5 months up to 2 ½ years.

The main reason dental practises gave for not being able to accept new patients was staff shortages. Many practises were missing dentists, or did not have enough funding from the NHS to provide extra appointments. As mentioned previously in the report, extra funding has just been announced for the North East and Yorkshire, so it is hoped things will improve shortly, and that additional funding can become a regular thing.

It has also been highlighted to us by dentists that you do not need to register with a dentist to obtain an appointment. There is a general misconception that you must register before you can be seen by a dentist. You are also able to be seen by a dentist outside of the area where you are a resident.

Conclusions

For those who already have a dentist in Rotherham, it seems that many are able to obtain a dentist appointment, even for just a check-up, with relative ease. As reported, 40% of people were very satisfied with being able to obtain a dentist appointment.

The real issue lies with those who are not registered with a dentist in Rotherham. The data collected from our survey, contacting dental practices and enquiries from the past 12 months really highlight the struggles people are facing when trying to find an NHS dentist. Only two dental practices in Rotherham confirmed they were accepting new patients, and one of those still had a 5 month waiting list. Other dentists were not accepting new patients at all, with some having waiting lists as long as 2 ½ years. This is leaving patients in pain, frustrated and distressed.

Patients are directed to NHS 111 in an emergency, but many have reported that their dental issues have not been classed as urgent enough by operators, despite being in pain. As reported in national news, this has led to people undertaking their own dental treatment in a desperate attempt to relieve the pain. Patients are also directed to the NHS 'Find a Dentist' tool online, by dental receptionists, NHS 111 and services including us. As we have discovered, many of the dentists listed have outdated and inaccurate information, which results in people spending hours ringing around trying to find a dentist with no success.

The January 2022 stakeholder update did have some positive updates, with the £8.63 million extra funding for the North East and Yorkshire hopefully resulting in additional dentist appointments for patients. It is hoped that as we continue to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, the pressure on services will gradually ease. There is no mistaking that this will be a long road for dental services across the country, with practices desperately trying to catch up on appointments and reduce waiting list times. Staff shortages mean this may delay things even further, and it is essential dental services are supported as much as possible to ensure patients do not suffer as a result.

Recommendations and/or next steps

1. Practices should update the NHS England 'Find a Dentist' page on a regular basis to ensure patients have accurate information about each dental practice available in their local area. This will save residents vast amounts of time ringing dentists to register with them, only to find out they are not taking on new NHS patients, or have a long waiting list (contrary to what the website states)
2. Ensure dental advice to patients is made clear on the NHS England website as well as dental practice's websites. Make it clear to patients what is classed as an emergency under the current stakeholder guidelines, and what they can do to ease the pain if they cannot obtain an appointment.
3. Keep up regular communication with patients, especially families with children, on how to keep their teeth healthy and clean, particularly if check-up appointments may be extended to 24 months. This can prevent issues developing in the future that could have been preventable.
4. Highlight to patients clearly that you do not need to actually register with a dentist to obtain an appointment, and that you can attend a dentist that is outside of Rotherham if you are able to travel.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all respondents who helped us to collect this data. We truly hope the issues surrounding dentist appointments will continue to ease throughout the year.

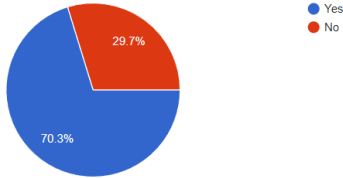
Appendix:

Survey questions:

Questions Responses **279** Settings

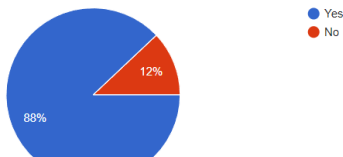
1. Are you currently registered with an NHS dentist in Rotherham?

279 responses



2. If 'yes' to Question 1, have you tried to book an appointment with your dentist in the last 12 months?

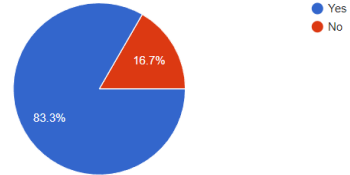
216 responses



Questions Responses **279** Settings

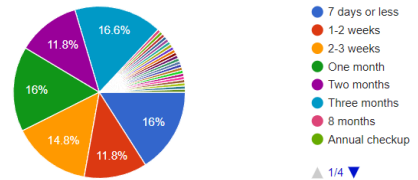
3. If 'yes' to Question 2, were you successful at booking an appointment with your dentist?

192 responses



4. If 'yes' to Question 3, how long did you have to wait for an appointment?

169 responses



4. If 'yes' to Question 3, how long did you have to wait for an appointment?

169 responses



4. If 'yes' to Question 3, how long did you have to wait for an appointment?

169 responses



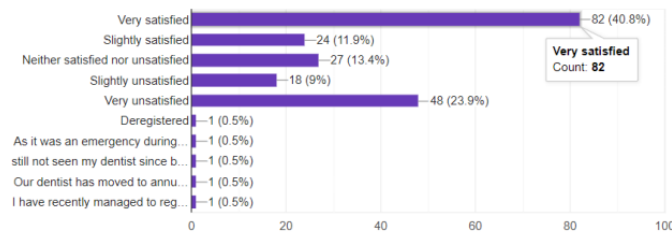
4. If 'yes' to Question 3, how long did you have to wait for an appointment?

169 responses



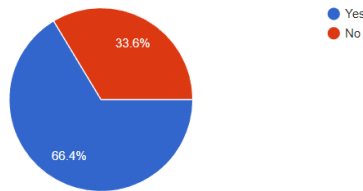
5. How satisfied were you with the process of obtaining a dentist appointment?

201 responses



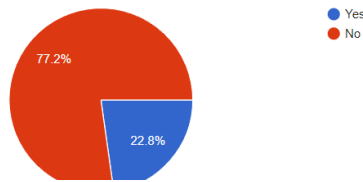
6. If 'no' to Question 1, have you tried to register with an NHS dentist in Rotherham in the past 12 months?

110 responses



7. Were you successful in registering with an NHS dentist in Rotherham?

101 responses



8. What was the reason for trying to book an appointment and/or register with a dentist?

202 responses

