



**healthwatch**  
Wakefield

# Review of Feedback: Dental Services

March 2021

## What we've heard about dentistry

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, enquiries to Healthwatch Wakefield about dental services and access to them have significantly increased; this remains one of the most common issues we hear about.

The overall theme is one of confusion. People have felt unable to access clear information about the changes to dentistry services over the course of the pandemic. Now that many dentists are beginning to offer more treatment, we are still hearing from people who aren't able to access care.

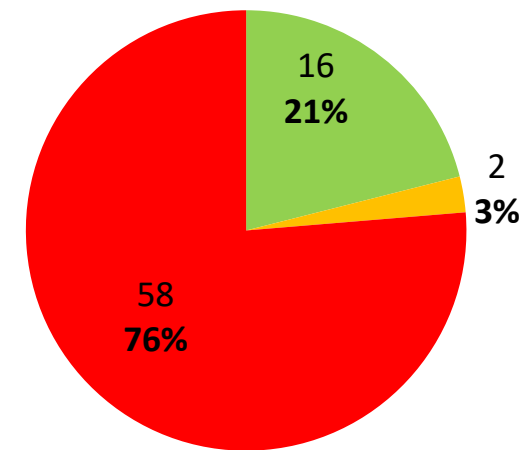
We know that dentists have been trying to treat patients as much as possible and have to operate with limited capacity and strict safety procedures. We also acknowledge that local action is constrained by complex national challenges around the commissioning and contracting of dental services. However, the impact on people trying to access dental care during Covid-19 has been significant, and we know that many people have been left distressed and confused by the situation.

## Review and analysis of feedback

A total of 76 items of feedback have been received by Healthwatch Wakefield over the last 12 months:

- 21% (16 items) were categorised as positive feedback / good practice.
- 3% (2 items) were mixed feedback.
- 76% (58 items) were negative experiences / areas for improvement.

**Red / Amber / Green (RAG) Rating:  
Dental Feedback**



■ Positive ■ Mixed ■ Negative

## Key messages

### Good practice

- Staff attitude has been described as: “friendly”, “helpful”, “welcoming”, “brilliant”, “great” and “lovely.”
- Some dentists have kept patients up to date with information during the pandemic.
- The following dentists have received praise:

BUPA Dental Care, Castleford	Pontefract Dental Care on Beastfair
Crigglestone Dental Care	Ropergate Dental Practice
Horbury Dental	The Mount, Peterson Road
Outwood Dental Practice	Tovey Little Dental
Poldent Wakefield	

- For patients who have been able to access a dental appointment they have felt safe in the environment during the pandemic.

### Negative feedback / areas for improvement

- Lack of dental provision due to pandemic:
  - Patients are not able to register for themselves, relatives or children.
  - Dentists are not taking on new patients during this time.
  - Difficulties for individuals to register at dentists who have recently moved to Wakefield Di.
  - No emergency dental appointments have been available.
- Some routine appointments have been cancelled.
- Some patients wanted more information re: which dentists are available in Wakefield to register / access.
- Some patients have contacted or have been signposted to NHS 111 as an alternative to seek advice and treatment re: dental health, care and treatment.
- Some GPs will not prescribe antibiotics for dental issues.

## Impact on Patients

- Patients (adults and children) are left in pain.
- Patient wellbeing has been affected.
- Some patients have been advised that private dentists are registering new patients and they could register privately but some individuals cannot afford to pay for private dental care and treatment. Patients feel that this is “unfair” (inequalities).
- Poor oral care (cracked/broken teeth, holes, fillings, etc.)
- Some treatment is only temporary.

## What is happening now

### Delayed Treatment

We are beginning to hear from people about the longer term impacts of delayed or paused treatment. People who needed fillings or root canal work told us that they had been left in pain for a significant amount of time, and the pain medication prescribed over the phone isn't always enough to help them.

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*“I have had an excruciating pain in my tooth and I cannot get to my dentist. I phoned NHS 111 and they were next to useless. There are no emergency dental appts. in this area. I contacted my GP surgery, they won't touch dental problems, they won't even prescribe antibiotic for a tooth abscess so what on earth am I supposed to do?? It's a disgrace having nothing in place for dental issues.”*

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### Lack of clarity about what is 'urgent' care

We know that dental pain can be very distressing – so when people are told their issue isn't urgent or they can't access care, it can be confusing. Local Dental Network guidance advises that dentists should triage people who contact them for treatment, but we've heard this doesn't always happen, and some people do not get chance to explain their issue.

One person told us her dentures had broken and she could not eat properly, but after phoning several dentists without being triaged and being able to explain her issue, she didn't know what else to do.

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*“My wife has been trying for last four weeks to find a dentist following severe tooth ache. Parts of her tooth are now falling out. We simply cannot find a dentist anywhere despite checking the NHS site and contacting numerous practices that are taking on NHS patients - we cannot afford to go private.”*

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Others feel it's unclear what is considered urgent – for example a person with gum disease who's been unable to get this checked for over a year, as he was told it wasn't urgent.

We know that dentists have limited capacity while trying to care for patients and maintain proper safety procedures. However, for patients who are told their issue isn't urgent enough, it can be difficult to accept. For these individuals, who are often in a significant amount of pain, it would be helpful to have clearer public communication about what their options are, and what they can expect when phoning a dentist for triage.

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*“My daughter was in pain with tooth ache. We had to call 3 or 4 times before we could be offered an appointment. When she was examined the dentist simply tapped the tooth and said she needed a root canal or extraction and an implant. Neither of these would be available on the NHS. She was not given any antibiotics or x-rays. Very little concern was shown at all.”*

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### Accessing a new dentist

Patients who aren't already connected with a dentist appear to be having more problems accessing treatment than those who do have a regular dentist.

This includes people who are new to Wakefield, or families trying to make an appointment for a child.

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*“I have spent this morning ringing numerous dentists to see if they are taking on any new NHS patients. Every single one has said no and hasn't even offered to put me on a waiting list. I understand things are difficult at the moment with the pandemic, but I feel like nowhere is offering me any help. I do not want to be forced into going private. I also find it unfair that dentists are happily taking on private patients but not NHS.”*

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NHS England guidance states that patients can phone a local dentist for urgent care even if they have not been treated there before.

However, we have heard confusion about this – whilst dental practices don't have a patient list in the same way that GP practices do, people tell us that their local dental practice has cited 'not being registered' as a reason they cannot access an appointment. It is unclear where this miscommunication is coming from, but clearer information both publicly and internally may help to alleviate this confusion.

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*“Could you please help me find a dentist taking on new NHS patients in the Wakefield district? I have phoned at least 20 and none are taking on new NHS patients.”*

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*“Could you please let me know if anyone in my area is taking on new patients as I have called many and cannot get in.”*

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## Accessing a new dentist from one of our Young Healthwatch volunteers:

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*“I shadowed Anna Hartley at a VCS board meeting, which allowed areas in Yorkshire and Humber to raise health-related concerns regarding refugees and asylum seekers. One of the concerns brought up numerous times was regarding dentistry. It was raised that some refugees and asylum seekers are not able to access dental treatment, those that work with them are only allowed to advise them to take paracetamol for the pain. However, some asylum seekers and refugees are not given any cash, and others are given as little as £8 a week, and therefore cannot actually afford paracetamol. The caseworkers, GPs, charity/organisation employees are not allowed to give them paracetamol for free. Due to some people going straight into dispersed accommodation (DA), they haven't got HC2 certificates and, so, access to free medication.*

*My question is, now knowing this, what can be done to help refugees and asylum seekers to access free dental treatment where they are able to go see an actual dentist? And how do they intend to provide free medication as they are unable to afford it due to either having no cash or only a small amount weekly.”*

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## NHS vs Private dental care

Some people have told us there is a long waiting list – sometimes 18-24 months long – to see an NHS dentist. Others have told us that their local dental practice were unable to see them as an NHS patient at all but said they could pay for private care and be seen more quickly.

The number of people telling us about this has increased significantly since November – and people who cannot afford to pay for private care tell us they're very concerned about this disparity. Access to NHS vs private dental care could have an ongoing impact on existing health inequalities.

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*"I am in diabolical pain & already been sent to A&E by 111 after I said how many pain killers I had taken over 3 days. [I'm told my] dental treatment has to be done under sedation. Private Practice will do it, but I do not have the money. They will refer to NHS for sedation treatment, but I still have no way of affording an appointment plus x-ray. Is this the way NHS has gone that because a patient has no other choice other than need sedation, they get no help whatsoever? What am I supposed to do, I am in agony, can barely speak, and I get no help!!!"*

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*"We had to go private in order for our two children to be seen by a dentist (they hadn't seen the dentist for over 12 months by this point), which cost £100 in total (normally £200 but they had a 50% discount offer, which is why I decided to do it). This was for the privilege of just looking at our kids' teeth and not doing any cleaning or putting fluoride on their teeth. The reason why we had to do this is because our current dentist says that government restrictions mean that they can't see children. However, they were happy to see:*

- *my husband and I for hygienist appointments*
- *my husband to have a new bridge made and fitted*
- *my daughter (a child!) for a hygienist appointment*

*So it seems free NHS treatments, e.g. regular dental checks are unavailable, but where we have to pay, there is less of an issue. I know we are lucky because we could afford the £100 and many people don't have this money available. I am angry about it though because dental health of children in West Yorkshire is one of the worst in England and we need decent teeth in order to eat well and feel good about ourselves - it is a health and mental health issue as far as I'm concerned."*

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## Access to clear information

Services had to change how they operate very quickly at the start of the pandemic, and this rapid change had an impact on how easily people could find out what was going on.

Many of the people who phone us say they are struggling to find information online, or that they hear an out of date answerphone message when they phone their dentist.

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*“The NHS website has info on which practices are taking NHS patients. It doesn't mention if they are taking private patients (possibly to be expected). But if the practice has not updated its info in the last 90 days, it doesn't tell you one way or the other, and just says the practice has not updated their info in the past 90 days.”*

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## What have we done so far

At Healthwatch Wakefield we have been extremely concerned about the state of dental services in our district, based on the feedback we have been hearing from the public.

As a result, we have been reporting our concerns, the evidence received from the public, case studies, feedback and intelligence into a number of local, regional and national key decision makers.

These include:

- NHS Wakefield CCG Quality Intelligence Group
- NHS England Dental Commissioning Executive
- NHS England Chief Dental Officer
- NHS England Regional Commissioning Teams
- Healthwatch England
- West Yorkshire & Harrogate Health & Care Partnership
  - (in particular the System Oversight & Assurance Group)

## Responses from NHS England

We received an update from the Chief Dental Officer's team (3 March 2021) about action taken to improve access in response to issues raised.

*“In order to ensure that the correct information is available to patients the following actions have been taken:*

- 1. Communications have been sent to all dental practices asking them to update their NHS.UK profile, it has been advised, that it is important for dental contractors to review this information regularly to ensure it is correct and up to date. This may help their business run more efficiently, reducing calls from patients enquiring if they are accepting new patients and freeing up their call lines for patients wanting to book appointments. This is also a good way to demonstrate that they have made attempts to reduce the quantity of unfilled appointments.*
- 2. NHS BSA are working in collaboration with the DOS (Directory of Service) teams, to update the DOS system which is used by NHS 111.*
- 3. NHS BSA have published articles in their newsletter relating to: Limiting cancellations and managing lost appointment time and Misconceptions around NHS dental treatment (discussing NHS/private dentistry) for dental providers.*  
<https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/compass/resources-dental-practices>”

## Next steps

The update from the Chief Dental Officer's team has done little to reassure us that the feedback from members of the public across our district – and many other areas of West Yorkshire and, indeed, England as a whole – is being heard, listened to, and acted on.

**We feel that perverse incentivisation is sustaining harm in the system: namely the current situation whereby dental practices have to achieve only 45% of UDA targets to receive 100% of funding.**

We therefore continue to escalate concerns and issues whenever we can, both as an individual local Healthwatch organisation and collaboratively with colleagues from other local Healthwatch organisations across West Yorkshire and Harrogate.

We will be presenting our ongoing and updated feedback at the April meeting of the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership's System Oversight and Assurance Group (SOAG).

Representatives of NHS England will be attending the meeting to hear the feedback and respond to the concerns raised by members of the public. NHSE will be represented at SOAG by Emma Wilson, Head of Public Health Commissioning, and Vicky McEvoy, Locality Project Officer.

Healthwatch Wakefield would welcome further support from the Wakefield's Adults Services, Public Health and the NHS Overview and Scrutiny Committee members regarding this important issue.

We will not rest until local NHS Dental Service provision is of the quality the public across our district deserve.



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**Working with local people to make our health and care services the best they can be.**

Healthwatch Wakefield 2021

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