


Bedford Borough

NHS Dentistry

**An Observational Review Of
Publicly Accessible Information**

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Background

Who manages NHS dentistry provision in Bedford Borough?

Dentistry in England is a patch-work of both NHS and private dentistry with most dentists opting to provide both. The NHS commissioned service provision works on a target-based system for the financial year and is useful for most dentists, as it gives them a steady income. However, some dentists choose not to undertake NHS work at all. That is their prerogative.

For those dentists who do have a contract with the NHS, their contract is with NHS England. NHS England act as Commissioners, meaning that they hold financial responsibility. The NHS website:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/primary-care/dentistry/dental-commissioning/> explains how NHS England is 'required to meet the needs of their local population for both urgent and routine dental care.'

NHS Improvement East of England is one of seven regional teams that support NHS England to commission dental services, including specialised services. Their remit includes reducing health inequalities, improving care for patients and ensuring that the care patients receive is of the highest quality, delivered by professionals with the required skill set. The NHS contract with dentists is different from the contract with GPs, as dentists are paid for what they do rather than the number of people they support. There are also Local Dental Networks (LDNs) which have been set up to support dentists.

Some owners of local dental practices have expressed their concern about the current NHS dental contract, which has been described by the British Dental Association (BDA) as 'not fit for purpose'. Working under this contract had been associated with stress and burnout among dentists. A Healthwatch England Report, published in December 2021, calls on the Government and NHS England (NHSE) to 'speed up dental contract reform and provide meaningful funding.

From July 2022 local authorities, NHS Commissioners, Trusts and healthcare providers will be working more closely together within new Integrated Care Systems (ICS), with the aim of integrating care across the different organisations and settings. Responsibility for dentistry will also transfer to the ICS. However, it is not yet clear when these responsibilities will be handed over.

Tell us about your care
to make sure services
work better for us all.



About Healthwatch Bedford Borough

We are an independent consumer champion which gathers and represents the views of the public. We seek to ensure that the public's view is taken into account whether relating to health or social care. We work with service Commissioners and providers to make sure that the public's voice is heard.



NHS Dentistry and COVID-19

Dental practices providing NHS services were ordered by the UK government to close their doors as part of the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, due to risk management of the initial impact of the pandemic. This was because of the unique characteristics of the dental setting, the risk of cross-infection between patients and dental practitioners, and the absence of adequate protective measures, especially as the virus had been identified in the saliva of infected patients.

When NHS dental services resumed in June 2020, the BDA said that there was no possibility of the service carrying out anything more than a fraction of the 39.72 million courses of treatment that were provided by NHS dentists in England in 2018–2019. The national press reported how little time dentists had been given to prepare to open again.

When Healthwatch Bedford Borough was contacted by members of the public, all of them were aware that people in pain would be treated first. Although they did not know all of the technical details of COVID-19 and dentistry, people were aware that it would take longer to see patients and that there was a backlog.

When people contacted our signposting service we talked to them about how dental pain affected their everyday activities, especially sleep. We explained how urgent dental care centres had been set up to make sure that people did not have to live with dental pain. However, these could not be accessed directly, if they did not have a dentist themselves then they should contact NHS 111. We were made aware that some people signposted to 111 decided to wait until there was less pressure on the NHS. This was a well-documented occurrence throughout NHS services. Every caller appeared mindful of the needs of the NHS and dentistry, at a time of unprecedented pressure on services.

From September 2020, we received our first call relating to a local resident being 'deregistered' from a dentist. Contracts for NHS dental care are set up so that people have the 'freedom' to move from one dentist to another. This is in direct contrast to the arrangement with GPs, who have a contract to look after a number of patients within a set geographical boundary area. However, dentists have given the impression that registration is a necessary factor by asking members of the public to fill in registration forms.

Members of the public were appalled to find out that they had been removed from lists without a reasonable explanation being given, if they had not contacted their dentist in the previous six months. This being the six months during which a vast proportion of the general public had only used NHS services when they felt it was absolutely necessary. Because the registration system was an informal agreement rather than a contractual

stipulation, these de-registrations did not form part of the NHS complaints system.

We also received phone calls from people who were asked by dentists to pay for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and to pay prices that they considered unfair for basic dental charges (including examples of being asked to pay £250 for an extraction). Complaints about private dental care fall outside of our Healthwatch remit but these calls have raised our awareness of changes to the dental sector in Bedford that we consider troubling.

In the past year we have received a steady number of calls from people who are not able to access NHS dental care at all. Some of this group had not 'registered' with a dentist before the onset of the pandemic and some reported that they had been taken off their practice list.

There are now three tiers of dental care within Bedford Borough. The top tier is private care in which people have access to dental expertise and a wide range of materials. The second tier is those who have access to NHS dental care and expertise and the materials available within NHS care. The third tier is the group of people with no access to routine care and treatment. There are currently only a very limited number of dentists who are taking on new NHS patients in the Borough, yet there appears to be capacity within the system, with private dental care being available with limited waiting times for consultation.

The third group with no access to NHS dental care includes some of the most vulnerable people in society – people who have left mental health inpatient care or prison services. In addition, the number of children in Bedford Borough without access to routine dental care or regular check-ups remains undocumented. There is provision for emergency care for this group but until recently there was no provision for routine care to avoid emergency situations. 'Cosmetic work' such as dead or decayed teeth and oral gaps or spaces due to decay and/or dying nerves are also not provided for. We have spoken to people suffering excruciating social embarrassment as a result of these 'cosmetic' treatment needs, and the perceived gap in NHS provision. Shame, embarrassment and guilt which in turn leads to poorer long-term oral health and mental health outcomes.

In October 2021, Healthwatch England co-signed an open letter addressed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak calling for a recovery plan for NHS dentistry. Healthwatch England supported the British Dental Association (BDA) in calling on the Chancellor to use the forthcoming Spending Review to provide vital investment in NHS dentistry.

In January 2022, NHS England revealed new regional funding for people suffering oral pain, disease and infection. NHS dental practices have been asked to meet as many prioritised needs as possible, focussing first on urgent care and care for vulnerable groups, including children, followed by overdue adult appointments. However, a question has been raised in Parliament relating to what will happen to this budget allowance in geographical areas where there are insufficient dentists with an NHS contract to deliver the additional NHS appointments by the end of March 2022. The East of England has historically had the lowest spending on dentistry provision per head of population, compared to other regions. In this context, we are concerned that barriers exist in reaching these groups, which widens the health inequality gap even further.



Why we are concerned about NHS information and practice websites?

In January 2021, NHS England and NHS Improvement East of England and Local Dental Networks of the East of England sent out an 'Expectations and Efficiencies' letter to all dental practices with NHS contracts which included the following statements:

Practices will demonstrate they are available to see patients for face-to-face NHS care and indicate their contracted opening hours by:

A) Maintaining their NHS UK (NHS Choices) profile up-to-date to show they are available to accept:

- i) urgent patients within the NHS
- ii) all age groups (unless their contract indicates otherwise)
- iii) accepting adults entitled to free NHS dental care
- iv) their NHS contracted opening hours
- v) accessibility (e.g. wheelchair access, disabled WC, induction loops etc.)
- vi) parking availability

B) Advising on the 'landing page' of their website that they are accepting all patients for face-to-face NHS care including urgent care for all age groups, in a similar manner to the information provided on the NHS UK website.

The NHS website (www.nhs.uk) is one of the key sources of information that NHS England says is available to the general public to find local dentists accepting NHS patients. We have been informed that people looking for NHS dentists are ringing more than 20 practices in Bedford Borough because these entries are not kept up-to-date regarding whether treatment is available.



Methodology

We wanted to know if dentists were taking on new NHS patients. We therefore undertook a deep dive, looking at both the NHS website and dental practice websites in both late December 2021 and early January 2022 to understand if the information was meaningful, current and easy to understand.

We began by looking at the NHS website. On the website, you are able to search for a dentist using the ‘find services near you’ option. On entering a town, city or postcode, you will be given a list of dental practices starting with the closest to your location.

Each entry covers:

- Contact details – address, phone, online (email and website if available). Directions, opened in Google, where maps are included as standard
- Details relating to whether the practice is taking on new NHS patients
- Opening times
- Accessibility
- Parking
- What patients say

It should be noted that whilst NHS England see the NHS website as a key source of information for patients, contractually NHS England cannot make dentists update their entries, only recommend this as a regular course of action. Dentists therefore update and/or maintain their website entries on a voluntary basis.

The ‘Is this Dentist taking on new patients’ section should state what type of patient the dentist is taking on at the time of the search e.g. children, adults entitled to free NHS dental care, or fee paying adults (18 and over). It should also state whether the dentist is no longer taking on any of these patient cohorts. If the dental practice has not updated their entry in the previous 90 days, the only information given is the date that it was last updated.

We then looked at the individual websites for each dental practice to see if they displayed any up-to-date information for patients, including whether they are taking on new NHS patients. Where there was no information provided, we telephoned individual practices to enquire.

What we found

Dentist	NHS information	Dentist's own website	Telephone contact feedback
Adelaide House Dental Practice, MK40 2RN	Site has information from previous owners MGW which states 'Only with a referral'	No information supplied	Emailed for further information
Adelaide Square Dental Surgery, MK40 2RW	No information supplied	No information supplied	Private patients only
Bedford Dental Practice, MK41 0TE	No recent update. Last updated 2019	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	Not accepting new NHS patients at the moment
Bedford Dental Surgery, MK40 2PN	Accepting children as new NHS patients. Not accepting adults (including those entitled to free NHS care)	Website not available	
Bedford House Dental Practice, MK40 1NN	Not taking on new NHS patients	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on	

		new NHS patients	
Chrysalis Dental Practice, MK41 9NS	No recent update. Last updated 2011	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	Not accepting new NHS patients
De-ientes Bedford., MK40 3HU	No recent update. Last updated 2011	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	Not taking on new NHS patients
De-ientes Clapham, MK41 6DN	No recent update. Last updated 2011	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	Not taking on new NHS patients
Dental Centre, MK40 4GH	No information supplied	No information supplied	Private patients only
Dental Care Centre, Community Dental Services, MK40 2NT	Only with a referral. Provides services for groups of patients	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	
Edward Byrne Associates, MK40 2TW	Accepting children as new NHS patients not adults	No information supplied. Children are treated free of charge on NHS	
High Street Dental Practice, MK40 1RN	No recent update. Last updated 2019	Website not available	Not taking on new NHS patients at the moment

Kempston Dental Practice, MK42 8BL	Not taking on new NHS patients at the moment	No information supplied for NHS patients.	
Kimbolton Dental Practice, MK40 2NR	No recent update. Last updated May 2021	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	Left message asking for further information
London Road Health Centre, Community Dental Services, MK42 0NT	No recent update. Last updated 2017	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	By referral only
M&N Dental Practice, MK40 3JJ	No recent update. Last updated 2020.	NHS patients welcomed. No further information	
Midland Road Dental Practice, MK40 1QE	December - Accepting new NHS patients, later changed to show only with a referral	Website not available	
Mydentist Castle Road, MK40 3QE	Not taking new NHS patients at the moment	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	

Mydentist Supermarket, MK41 0SE	Not taking new NHS patients at the moment	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	
Mydentist, Howard Street, MK40 3HS	Accepting new NHS patients	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	
Priory Dental Practice, MK40 2QD	No recent update. Last updated 2011	Website said that they were taking on new NHS patients for a limited time	Practice Manager advised that they were no longer taking on new NHS patients
Queens Park Health Centre, Community Dental Services, MK40 4HR	Not taking new NHS patients at the moment.	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	
Shanks and Associates, MK40 2TX	No information supplied	No information supplied	Private patients only
Teamcare Dental Practice, MK40 3LH	No information supplied	Details of fees, information they are not taking new NHS patients given.	
The Village Dental Practice	No information supplied	No information supplied	Private patients only
Tigga Smile, MK40 1DN	Not taking any new NHS	No information on NHS	

	patients at the moment	treatments or fees	
UHP Dental Care, MK42 8BL	Only with a referral	Details of fees, no information on whether they are taking on new NHS patients	Not taking on new NHS patients at the moment

Findings

Our audit found that just over half of the dental practices had no information available on the NHS website. Thus, it was ‘not known’ if they were accepting NHS patients. The entries available to the public for these practices only gave a date on which information had last been supplied, ranging from 2011 to 2021. Of these dentists, only one of the dentists had further information on their practice website regarding NHS patients.

For dentists who rely largely on private patients, they may feel that maintaining their NHS profile is not an important part of their work and does not need regular upkeep. However, Healthwatch Bedford Borough feels that it is even more important that they update their pages, so vulnerable patients know not to ring them to ask for appointments and support, as the fees for non-NHS treatment would exclude them from receiving help.

Some dentists mention a referral process but the route for members of the public to undertake such a referral is unclear and they do not provide details of whom to contact for this.



Recommendations

Members of the public looking for a dentist are currently directed to NHS 111. Those who do not meet the criteria for urgent treatment are then directed to 'Find a Dentist' on the NHS website. It is unhelpful for advice to be given to the public asking them to use this, when the information provided on the site is not regularly updated.

Many dentists have relatively small NHS contracts and as such do not see updating their NHS pages as a priority. However, Healthwatch feels that makes it even more imperative that they let people know the services they are providing, at the time of the search. At the time of writing this report, there were only two dentists taking on new NHS patients within Bedford Borough. It is important that the public have a quick and efficient way of finding out where they can go for support and treatment.

The referral process to dentists needs to be clarified. The calls that we receive from the public indicate that GP practices are simply telling patients to call their dentist or are signposting to NHS 111, without explaining the referral process, the criteria for urgent treatment or who is deemed a priority group. People within priority groups for dentistry include those who are socially isolated, people with mental health difficulties, people who are homeless, and victims of domestic violence. People may not, however, reveal their personal information in a short phone call, either to a GP practice or NHS 111, unless they understand the relevance of this or are directly asked about this.



If you need urgent dental care or do not have a dentist, get in touch with NHS 111 online or by phone for advice.

Healthwatch Bedford Borough recommend that:

1. Improvements are made to the NHS 'Find a Dentist' website section

- Local dentists recognise the need for accurate and timely information on the NHS website and commit to updating their profiles every three months
- Regular email prompts are sent to Practice Managers, auto-generated to remind practices to update their information

2. NHS 111 provide reliable information and advice on where/how patients can access dental care, including:

- The referral process for people who require urgent treatment
- Access for people from priority groups
- The option of calling NHS England's Customer Contact Centre on 0300 311 2233 if, after contacting dental practices on the NHS list, they have been unable to find a practice taking on NHS patients

3. Dental practices regularly updating their own websites to provide information that is consistent with their profile on the NHS website

4. GP surgeries receive a CPD update to support them to understand and give information on priority groups and the referral process for NHS dentistry

5. Once the new NHS Integrated Care System (ICS) has taken on dentistry, they identify areas and communities with lower rates of access to the full range of NHS provision and ensure sufficient capacity to meet the needs of their population.



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