



Access to Dentistry in Leicester & Leicestershire February 2022

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Introduction

Healthwatch Leicester and Healthwatch Leicestershire are the local, independent voice for the public in health and social care services. We gather feedback and views from the public about their experiences of accessing and using health and social care service, using that feedback to work with commissioners and service providers to improve the services. Each year we carry out a number of projects that focus on a particular service or group of people to gain a better understanding of good practice and areas for improvement.

On this occasion we have carried out a project that looks at the experiences of people living in Leicester and Leicestershire in accessing dental care.

Access to dental care has been highlighted as a national issue by Healthwatch England on a number of occasions, most recently publishing updated research in December 2021 that says four out of five people are struggling to access NHS dental care; some dentists have used up their NHS capacity and are asking people for private fees; and many people are finding it hard to get up to date information on which practices are taking on new NHS patients because websites are not updated regularly and are contacting local Healthwatch for information.

Research published by NHS England in May 2021 found that people were facing two key issues: availability of dental appointments and affordability of treatment. Their large-scale survey found that over a quarter of people were avoiding accessing dental care because of the cost; 30% said that they felt pressured into paying private fees to get all the dental treatment that they needed; and almost a quarter felt that they only visit the dentist now when there is something wrong rather than having regular check ups to maintain their oral health.

Background

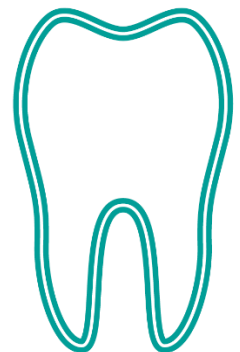
Between **1 April 2021 – 16 December 2021** we received **55** dental enquiries. The emerging themes from the enquiries were:

- People are not able to find a dental practice that is taking on new patients.
- People trying to find a dental practice are told there are no appointments, but they could be given a private appointment.
- People have tried to book an appointment at their dental practice, but if it is over 12 months, they find that they have been removed from the patient list.
- People are often not aware that there are seven Emergency Dental Services in Leicester and Leicestershire.

Methodology

The methodology for this project was a mixed methodology that was split into three distinct areas of work.

- 1.** We carried out a review of dental practices websites in Leicester and Leicestershire. We looked at the websites to assess whether they were taking on new NHS patients, how to go about registering and what information they had about NHS charges, eligibility for free NHS dental care and dental health information. Where we were unable to locate a website or where information was unclear, we contacted the practice by telephone to verify information.
- 2.** We created a survey asked people about their experiences of accessing and using dental services in Leicester and Leicestershire. The survey was available online and paper survey for face-to-face engagement across Leicester and Leicestershire.
- 3.** We aimed to carry out interviews with care home residents and care home managers about their experiences of accessing dental care. It was intended that there should be a care home from each district of Leicestershire and one from Leicester City visited to take part in the project.



Limitations

There are limitations to the methodology and findings of this project.

The website review telephone follow ups looked at practices that we had listed as operating in the City and County. However, it was found that some of the practices were no longer open. It was not possible to telephone every dental practice to verify the information and therefore, where there was no website, or the information was not clear, telephone follow ups were carried out.

Whilst there were 167 responses to the survey this sample does not provide a representative sample of the whole population. The sample were selected using opportunity sampling and were in effect self-selecting.

We were unable to access more than one care home to undertake interviews with residents and care home managers. This was due to a reluctance on the part of care homes to allow access with ongoing Covid-19 risks.

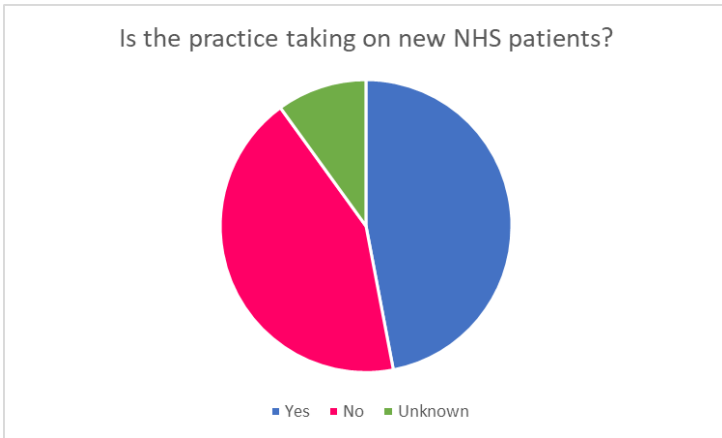
Therefore, the findings of this project provide a snapshot of the experiences of the people that were able to engage with and should be seen in the context of other research, particularly that carried out by Healthwatch England and other local Healthwatch providers.



Findings

Website Review

47% of the practice websites reviewed said that they were taking on new NHS patients and **43%** said that they were not taking on new patients.

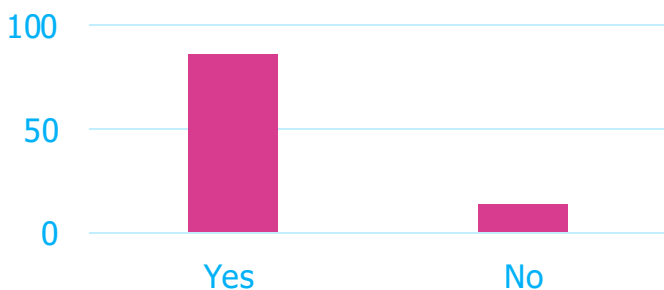


It was not clear from 10% of the websites whether they were taking on new patients or not. For the practices with a website where the information was not clear telephone calls were made to verify the information. Of the practices that we were able to speak to four were not taking NHS patients at all.

The other five said that they were not taking NHS patients currently because they had no spaces, but four offered ideas of timelines for potentially being able to register with one taking new patients in the winter of 2021; one saying to call back in the New Year and another saying it would be April 2022 before they could take new patients and the final one of the four saying there was a 10 month wait. The other practice did not give a timeline only that they currently had no space but would take new patients once they had space.

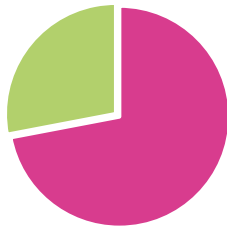
None of the nine practices where we were unable to locate a website said that they were taking on adult NHS patients, one said that they were taking children under the age of 16 as

Does the website explain how to register as a new patient?



86% of the websites explained how to register as a new patient with the practice. All of the practices that we contacted by telephone were able to tell us how to register with the practice, whether that be as an NHS patient or a private patient.

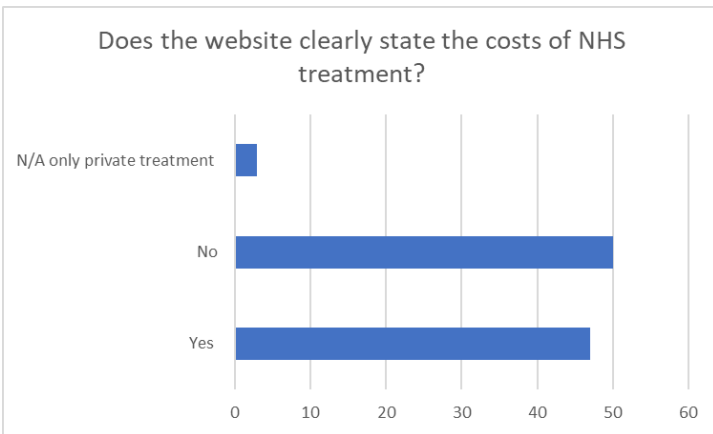
Does the website tell patients what to do in an emergency?



■ Yes ■ No

72% of the websites had information for patients about what to do in an emergency. **23%** of websites did not have that information.

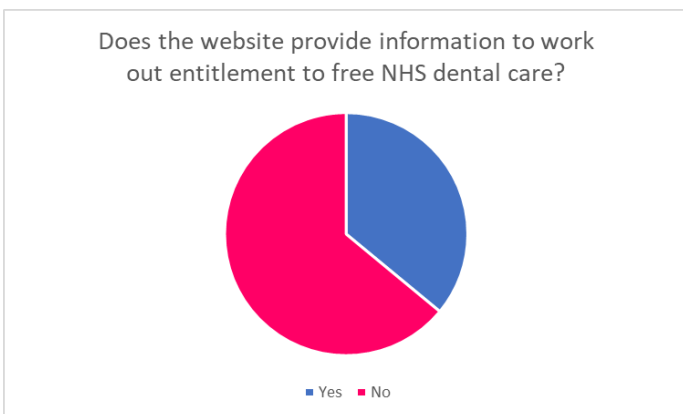
All the websites clearly showed the practice opening times.



50% of the websites reviewed did not clearly state the cost of NHS treatment and **47%** did.

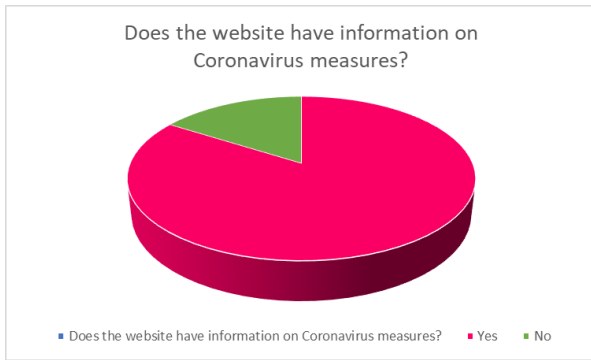
3% of the practices clearly showed that they only offered private dental treatment.

For those practices that we telephoned there were a range of ways that they informed patients of the NHS treatment prices where NHS treatment was available, these included giving out leaflets and having posters in reception or talking patients through the charges before beginning their treatment. However, one practice said that they do not inform patients of prices. If patients asked about prices, then they would provide information verbally.



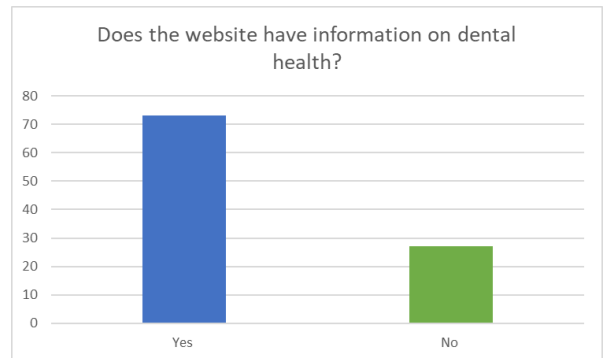
64% of the websites did not provide information for patients to be able to work out if they were entitled to free NHS dental care and **36%** did provide information.

The practices where we telephoned them had a range of ways to help patients work out if they were entitled to free treatment, these included providing leaflets and forms for the patient to complete indicating if they are in receipt of relevant benefits as well as talking to the patient and asking about their circumstances. However, one practice said that they do not provide any information and expected the patient to work it out for themselves.



84% of the websites had information for patients on the measures they were taking to safeguard against Covid-19.

73% of the websites had information on dental health and **27%** did not have information for patients on dental health.



Public Survey

There were a total of **167** surveys completed by members of the public.

49% of the respondents told us that they lived in Leicester; **47%** in Leicestershire and **4%** said that they preferred not to say where they lived.

We asked people about their ethnic background with the largest groups being from Asian Bangladeshi (**26.9%**), Asian Indian (**20.5%**) and White British (**26.3%**) backgrounds.

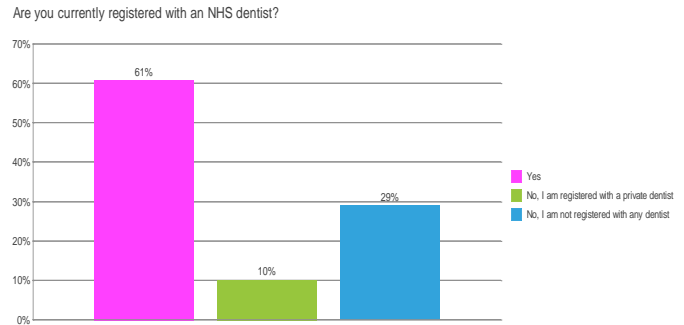
2% of the people who took part in the survey were pregnant or had given birth in the previous 26 weeks.

26% of people said that they had a disability and **40%** said that they had a long-term condition.



Registration with a dentist

People were asked if they were registered with an NHS dentist. **61%** of respondents said that they were registered with an NHS dentist; **10%** said that they were registered with a private dental practice; and **29%** said that they were not registered with any dental practice at all.



Although we do not believe we have a representative sample of people by ethnicity there were sufficient numbers of some ethnic groups to provide a comparison of registration by ethnicity to see if there were any particular differences in levels of registration. However, for those groups with the largest numbers of responses we did not find any particular differences in levels of registration.

73.8% of people from *Bangladeshi backgrounds were registered with an NHS dentist; **56.3%** of people from Indian backgrounds; and **61%** of people from White British backgrounds.

People who were registered with a private dentist rather than an NHS dentist were asked why they had chosen to register privately. Some of the responses related to being able to access dental care, for example, one person told us that they *'desperately needed a good dentist and could not get one on the NHS'*. Another said that *'dentists will not take me on as an NHS patient but have space for private patients. When you are in pain you are desperate, you join as a private patient and pay the huge amount for treatment'* and another that

'there are no local NHS dentists taking on new patients (I have rang them) so I contacted a private dentist who saw me the following day but I have had to put the charges nearing £1000 on my credit card.'

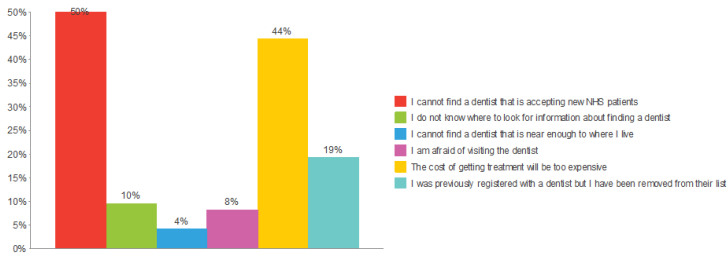
The speed with which they could access appointments was also given as a reason for registering as a private patient with one person saying that they saw it as *'faster to get an appointment and no waiting!'* whilst another said that it was *'better and faster treatment times.'*

There was a belief from a small number of people that private treatment was *'cheaper than the NHS'*.

*As part of our outreach activities, we visited several Asian Bangladeshi and Asian Indian groups in the city so the numbers appear higher for these groups.

The quality of care from a private dentist was also mentioned by some people with one saying that their dentist had been NHS but became a private practice and they had decided to *'stay with the one I trust'*; whilst another person felt that they got *'better quality work'* from a private dentist.

If you are not registered with any dental practice at all please tell us why? (tick all that apply)

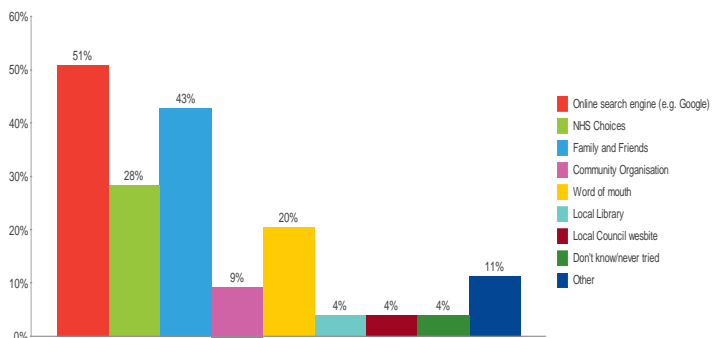


Those people who said that they were not registered with a dentist at all were asked why they were not registered. They were asked to tick all of the options that applied to them and so the final percentages are more than 100%.

50% of people answering the question said that they were unable to find a practice that was accepting NHS patients and **44%** said that the cost of getting dental treatment is too expensive. **19%** of people answering the question said that they had been de-registered by the dental practice they were with.

Other suggestions included contacting any local dentists, one person had asked their local pharmacist and another suggested using social media such as Facebook community pages. Some people said that they did not know where to go to find out about dentists whilst others said that although they had contacted local dentists directly, they had not been able to find a dentist taking on NHS patients.

Where would/do you go to find out information about dental care?

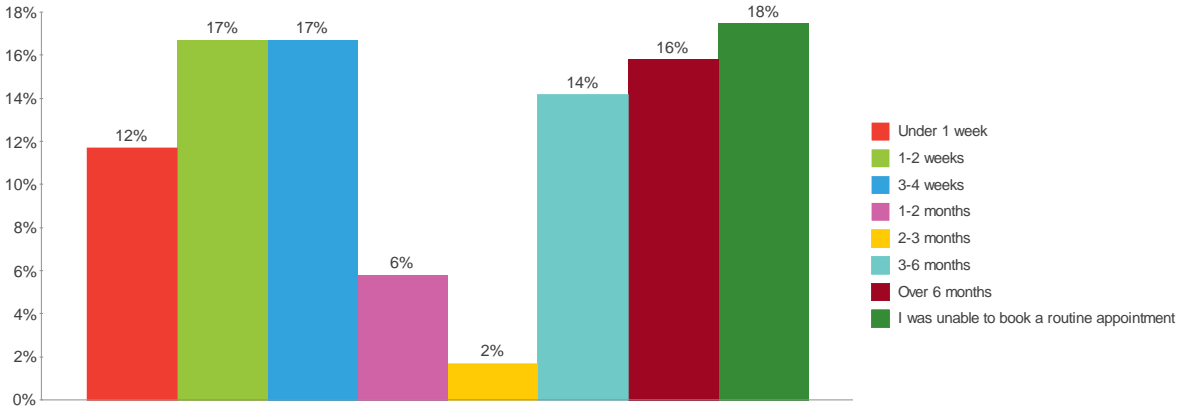


Booking routine appointments

People were asked if they had tried to book a routine dental appointment since January 2021, and **55%** of the respondents said that they had tried to book an appointment whilst the other **45%** said that they had not tried to book an appointment since January 2021.

Those that had tried to book a routine appointment were asked how long they had had to wait for their appointments. **18%** of respondents said that they were unable to book a routine appointment and **16%** said that they had waited for more than 6 months for an appointment. However, **12%** said that they had waited for less than a week and **17%** said that they had waited for 1-2 weeks.

How long did you have to wait before your routine dental appointment?



People who had not been able to book an appointment were asked to explain more about what had happened.

There were some people who told how they had discovered that they had been de-registered from the practice lists when they tried to book an appointment.

One person said that they moved dentist in September 2019 but had had various appointments cancelled by the practice and had ‘since found out, whilst trying to book an emergency dentist appointment...that we have all been de-registered.’

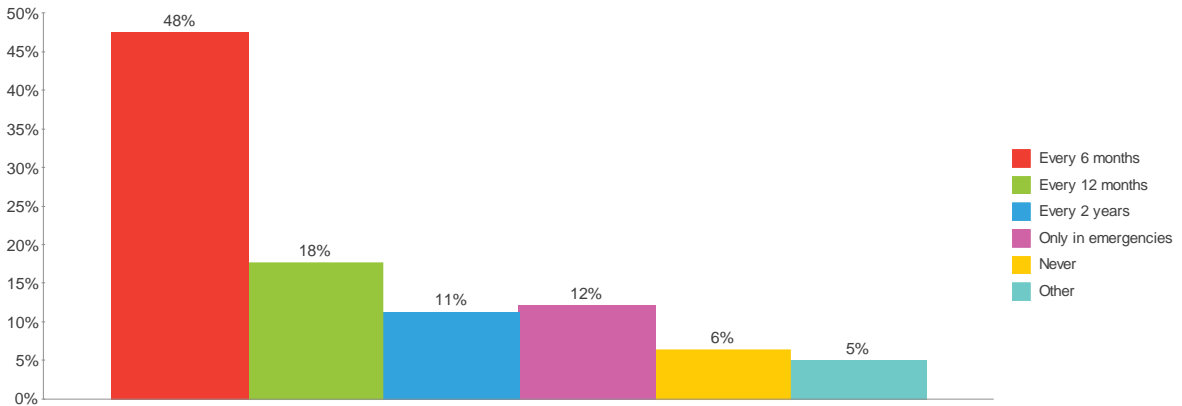
Another said that they had been *‘removed because haven’t visited since 2019, but we were in a pandemic.’*

Issues around capacity of dentists to take on new patients were mentioned by some people with one example being that a dentist had left and *‘there was only one dentist and there was a long waiting list.’* Another said that the practice that they had contacted was *‘fully booked and not able to take any new patients on’* and another said that there were *‘no spaces for new patients on the NHS, this is happening for two years. Even if my kids are registered, my husband and I cannot get a space.’*

Frequency of routine appointments

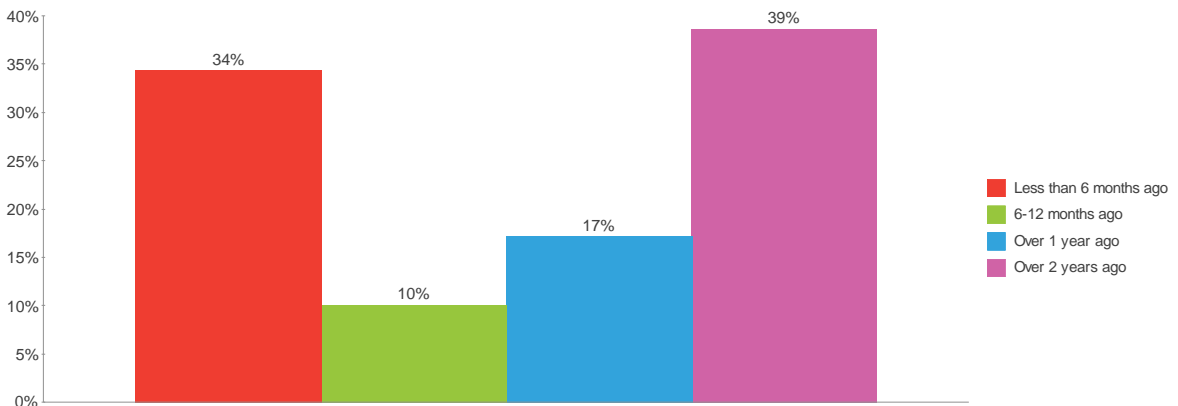
People were asked how often they usually visit the dentist for routine dental appointments and **48%** said that they usually had an appointment every six months. **12%** said that they only saw the dentist in emergencies and **6%** said that they never saw the dentist for routine dental appointments.

How often do you usually visit the dentist for a routine appointment?



When asked when they had last been for a routine dental appointment **39%** of people answering the question said that their last appointment had been over two years ago. However, **34%** has been for a routine appointment less than six months ago.

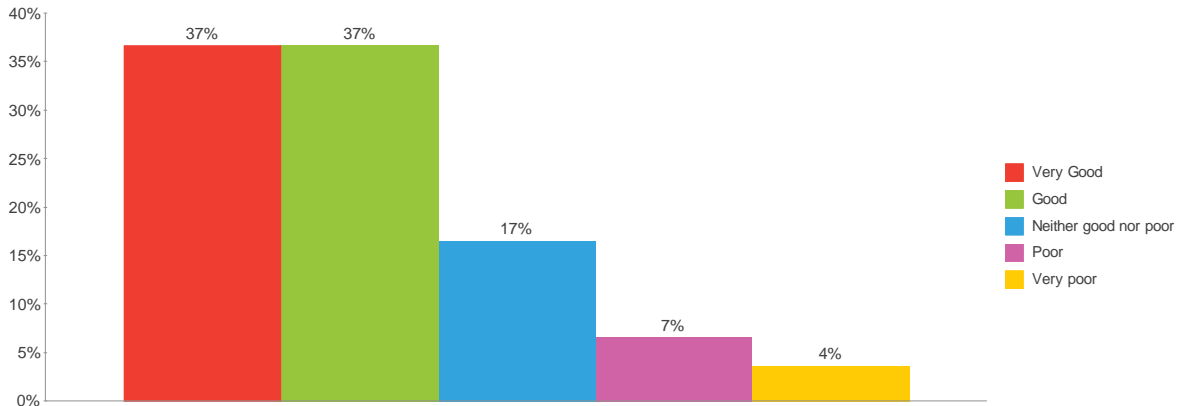
When was the last time that you attended for a routine dental appointment?



Patient Experience

People were asked to rate their experience on the last visit that they had to the dentist. **74%** of people who answered the question said that their experience had either been very good or good. **11%** said that it was poor or very poor.

Thinking about the last time that you visited the dentist how would you rate your experience?



Some of the more negative comments related to the quality of care received with examples such as one person saying that they were *'always in pain after dental appointments'* and another telling of how they had been *'left in pain'* after treatment.

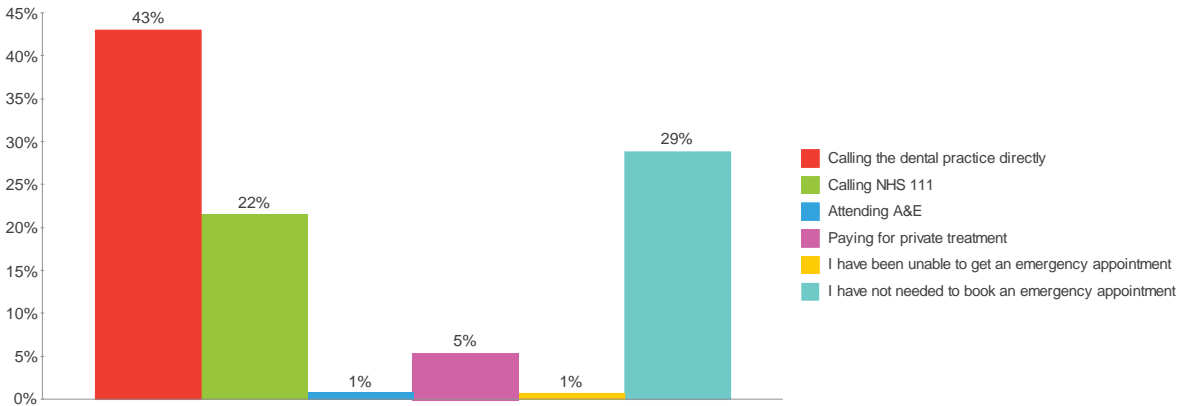
There were some that commented that the dentists that they had seen were *'interested in pushing me towards private treatment'*. One person said that they believed their dental practice were recommending treatment that was not necessary and they were *'being ripped off.'*

More positive comments related to good quality of care and having a person-centred approach. One person told how they had seen a *'learning disability special needs dentist'* who was *'very kind and sensitive.'* Another told how their dentist knows us and certainly dealt with significant changes in a thoroughly friendly and professional way.' Someone who was afraid of the dentist said '

'my fear of the dentist was understood, they showed real compassion of knowing how to deal with this. I was talked through everything that would happen and the best course of action for complete resolution.'

Emergency dental care

If you have had to book an emergency appointment, how have you made the appointment?..

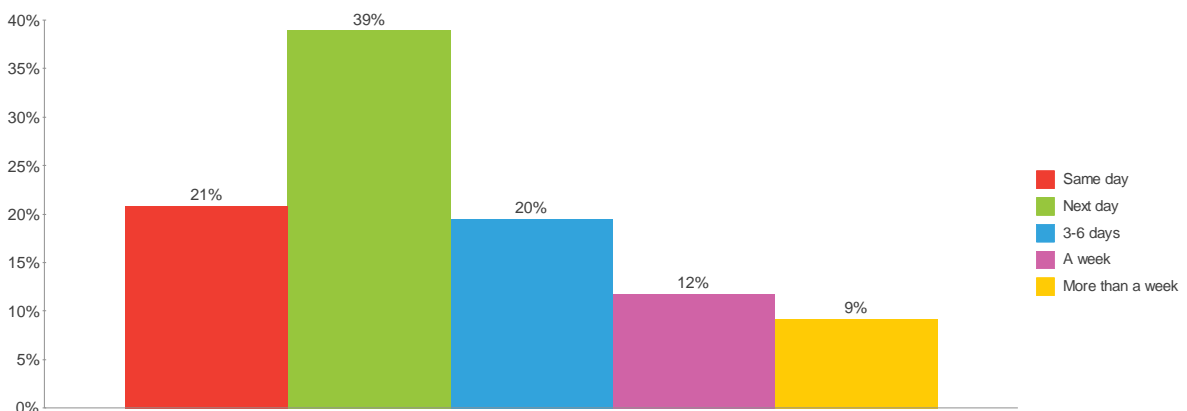


When people were asked about their experiences of booking emergency dental appointments **29%** told us that they had not needed to book an emergency dental appointment. **1%** said that they had not been able to book an emergency dental appointment.

43% of people answering the question had booked an emergency dental appointment by directly contacting the dental practice and **22%** said that they had called NHS 111 to access emergency dental care. **5%** of people who had booked an emergency dental appointment said that they had done so by paying for private dental treatment.

Those who had booked an emergency appointment were asked how long they had waited to be seen for their emergency dental appointment. **60%** of people said that they had been seen either the same day or the next day whilst **9%** said that they had waited for more than a week.

How long were you waiting to be seen for your emergency appointment?

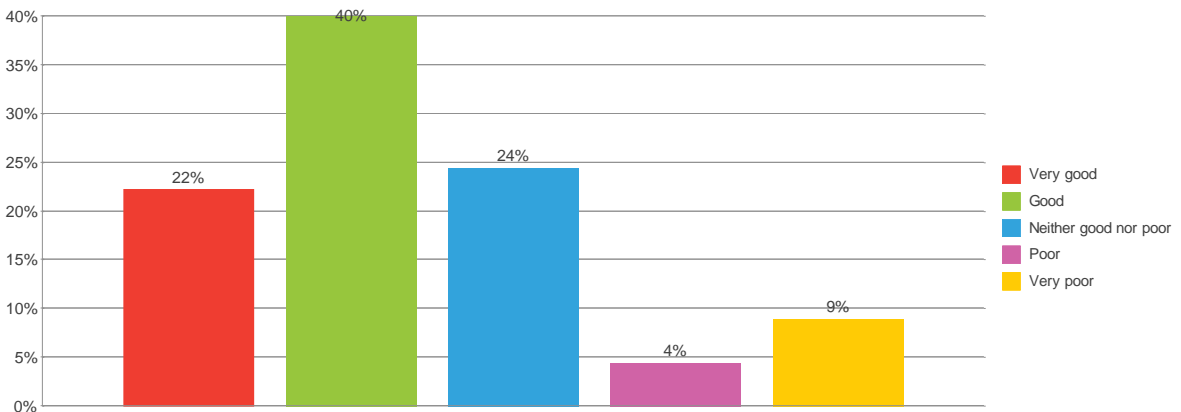


NHS 111

People were asked if they had used NHS 111 to access dental care. A fifth of respondents had used NHS 111 to access dental care but most had not.

Those who had used NHS 111 to access dental care were asked to rate the service. **62%** of people who answered the question said that they had found the service to be good or very good whilst **13%** said that it was poor or very poor.

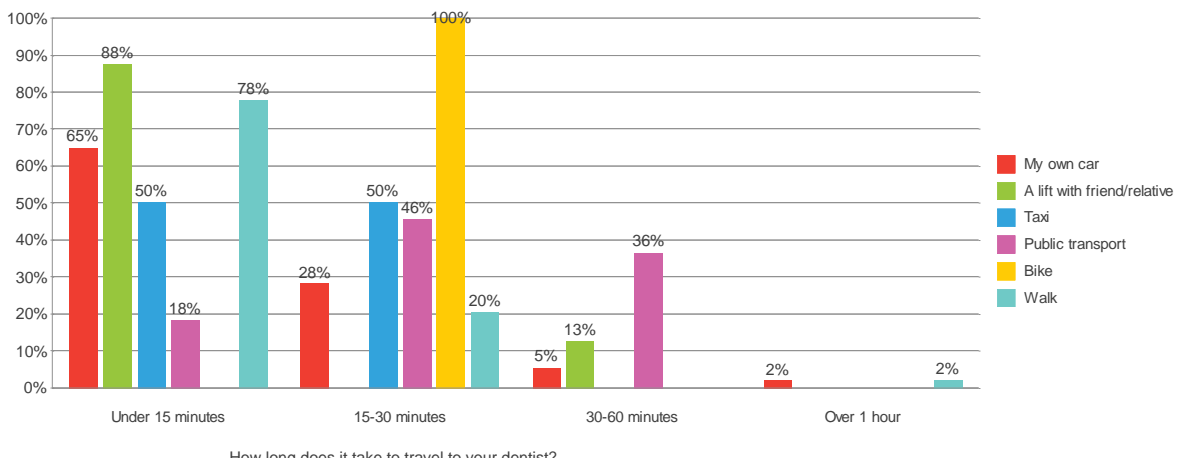
If yes, please rate your experience of the service?



Travel and location of dentist

People were asked how they normally travelled to the dentist. People were able to choose more than one method of travel. **62%** travelled in their own car and **54%** walked to their appointments. **11%** said that they took public transport to their appointments.

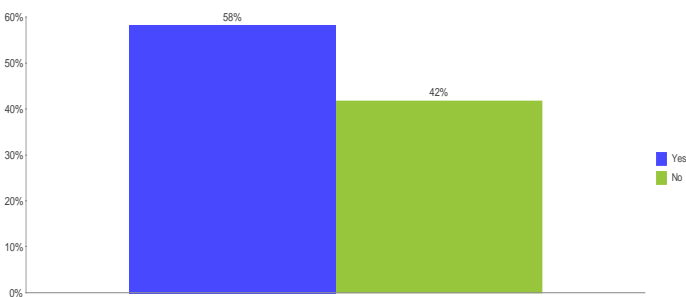
How do you usually travel to your dentist appointment? by How long does it take to travel to your dentist?



People were asked how long it took them to get to the dentist and this was cross tabulated with the method of travel in order to give a better idea of how far people have to travel to access dental care. **78%** of the people who walked to their appointment said that it took them less than 15 minutes to get to their appointment suggesting that their dentist was quite local to them. However, at the other end of the scale **2%** of the people who said that they used their own car to travel to appointments said that it took them more than an hour to get to their appointment, suggesting having to travel a significant distance to their appointment.

Payment

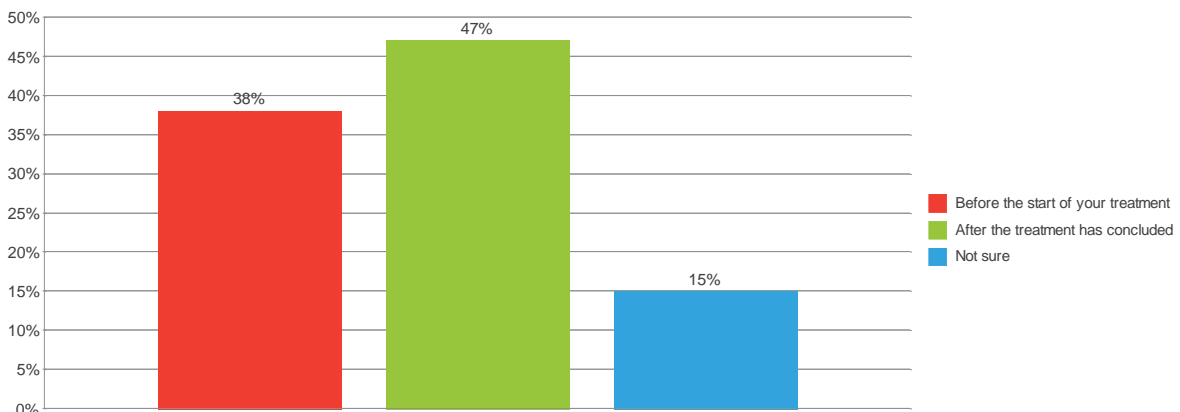
Do you have to pay for your NHS dental treatment? (excluding private treatment)..



58% of the people who answered the question said that they had to pay for their NHS dental treatment. They were then asked if they had charges explained to them before their treatment commenced and **75%** said that they did have the charges explained.

38% of the people who answered the question said that they were asked to pay for their treatment before it started and **47%** said that they paid after the treatment had been completed. The remainder were unsure when they had been asked to pay for their treatment.

When are you asked to pay for your treatment?



People responding to the survey were asked if they had any other comments on their experiences of accessing and using dental services. The comments made can be broadly broken down into comments about accessibility and comments about affordability.

One person said that they had *'been on a waiting list for a year to register my youngest daughter with the practice... It doesn't look like the practice is in any hurry to start any new registrations, yet I would have a space if I registered her as a private patient. The same applies to being able to book appointments too, if I was a private patient there are plenty available every day.'* Another said that they had *'rang every dentist listed on the 'Find me a dentist' list on the NHS Choices website in an eight-mile radius of where we live on the same day. NONE are currently taking on NHS patients.'* They said that they *'are unable to access dental services unless we register privately. This is not equity of service.'*

Issues of affordability were a key theme for people. One said that *'I can't afford private care but have no option'* whilst another said that *they 'don't go for routine checks or clean as it's not affordable.'* One person said that they had needed a tooth taking out but 'I couldn't afford it' and another that they had been trying to see a dentist but had not been able to.

'I was so desperate I went private for an appointment, but they quoted me £800 which as a student I couldn't afford. Now my tooth needs taking out when it could've been saved, and I can't even find a dentist to do that.'

Care Home access to dental care

It was only possible to undertake one care home visit as the other care homes that were contacted did not want to allow us to visit, nor were they willing to undertake a virtual visit.

Therefore, we have developed a case study to report the findings from the care home where we were able to speak to residents and the care home manager.

The care home that we were able to access cares for people with learning disabilities. We were able to speak to the care home manager and a group of six residents. The care home manager told us that residents were assessed in relation to their dental health when they first became resident, and this was confirmed by the residents who spoke to us. Anyone who says that they had dental issues were booked in with the dentist straightaway and those with no immediate issues were booked in to be seen in six months.

Access to routine appointments was reported by the manager to have 'not been great' during the pandemic, but that it had 'started to pick up again'. However, in more normal times the dentist called the home to inform them when residents were due to attend for a check-up. The residents of the care home confirmed that Covid-19 had affected their access to seeing the dentist but that they usually saw the dentist annually. Going to the dentist was straightforward for the residents as they were able to walk to their appointments either with staff from the home accompanying them or by themselves if they were able.

The dentist assessed whether residents were able to have free NHS dental care. They asked the care home manager about benefit entitlement but as this was not information that the care home were privy to, used whether a resident had their care funded or not as a proxy for assessing entitlement.

The care home manager felt that there were no barriers to accessing appointments for their residents when they were needed, their concerns related more to issues around capacity and consent for check ups and treatment.

In conclusion, from the feedback obtained from the one care home, they were able to access appointments for residents and had in place arrangements for regular dental health checks. These had been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic but were returning to a more normal service.

Conclusion

Whilst there are some limitations to the research carried out the findings broadly echo those of Healthwatch England in relation to access and affordability as well as being able to find out up to date information about dentists that are taking on NHS patients.

Our website review found that not all practices had a website or that the information was not always clear and up to date. We found from speaking to some practices there were long waiting times to be able to register as a new NHS patient with them, with one wait being 10 months.

We did find that 61% of the people who took part in our survey were registered with an NHS dentist, but for those that were not registered there were 50% of people who said that they could not find an NHS dentist and 44% said that the cost of treatment was too high for them to register with a dentist.

People told us that they were generally happy with the care that they had received when they saw the dentist, whether this was for a routine appointment or an emergency appointment. However, there were again some comments about access to emergency appointments being easier if they were willing to pay for their treatment privately.

Information about dental charges was not always available on practice websites including information on eligibility for free NHS dental care. Over half of the people who responded to the survey said that they had to pay for their treatment. Around a third were asked to pay upfront for their treatment. There were some comments made about the cost of treatment, particularly for those that had chosen to go for private treatment because they could not access NHS dental care, with some unable to have the treatment that they needed because it was not affordable or who had put themselves into debt to pay for it.

Recommendations

1

Explore the capacity of dentists to take on new patients.

2

Ensure provider websites, including the NHS website, are kept up to date with availability of NHS dental spaces for adults and children.

3

Provide clear information for patients on how to access emergency dental treatment.

4

All NHS practice websites to provide a link to the NHS website with the current banding charges for NHS dental treatment so that people are aware of all the costs relating to their treatment.

Recommendations

5

Provide patients who have been unable to access routine appointments or emergency appointments with their regular dentist with alternative options for their NHS dental treatment.

6

Issues of affordability was a key theme for people – Ensure that NHS dental treatment is available for all eligible people. Private dental care is not an alternative option for people who cannot afford it.

7

All websites to provide to provide a link to the NHS website for patients, so that they can work out if they are entitled to free NHS dental care.



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