

Herefordshire Dental Engagement

May 2022

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Introduction

Background

Healthwatch Herefordshire have been commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement to do a patient engagement exercise to gather opinions on future plans for dental services in Hereford and also to gather feedback from the public on their experience in accessing NHS dental services in Herefordshire.

NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE) are currently the commissioners of all NHS dental services available on the high street (primary care), through Community Dental Services or specialist dental services through Hospital Trusts (secondary care). NHSE will be launching a procurement exercise in 2022 to commission a large NHS dental service in Hereford. This engagement work will help them to shape how they will set up this service. The aim is to help with access to dental services in Herefordshire.

There are currently significant challenges for patients being able to access NHS dental services, partly due to recruiting dentists and nurses to work locally, and therefore there is a commitment to introducing a service that can respond to the needs of the patients. To increase the chance of this procurement being a success, a phased approach is being suggested starting with the introduction of a large practice in Hereford. This engagement aims to understand how this approach may affect the public and what needs to be done to ensure as many people as possible can access the service.

What we did

Alongside NHS England and NHS Improvement, we compiled a survey (Appendix 1) with questions about current access to dental services as well as asking for opinions on a variety of issues related to future access, including travel, timings of appointments and what aspects of dental care are most important.

The engagement for this project was done in a variety of ways to reach all corners of the community. This included an online survey, focus groups which took place in six locations as well as targeted work with specific communities and people that may be digitally excluded. This included distribution of the survey in a hard copy format.

The project was heavily promoted via our social media channels as well as on our website and a summary of the reach can be seen in Appendix 2. It was also publicised amongst community groups/organisations, local councillors and within local market towns. A full list of where the project was publicised can be seen in Appendix 3.

The online survey was launched on 4th April 2022 and was live for 6 weeks. The focus groups took place during April 2022 in Bromyard, Hereford, Ross, Leominster, Kington and Ewyas Harold as well as being offered in Ledbury. A meeting also took place to understand the views/experiences of veterans and military families currently in Herefordshire.

18 people in total attended the focus groups and although the attendance was low, there were some helpful conversations and possible solutions discussed.

Healthwatch produced a video for use at the focus groups, featuring Terrance Chikurunhe and Nuala Woodman from NHS England And NHS Improvement. The video outlined the current situation and challenges around dental access in Herefordshire. This video can be seen in Appendix 4.

Most people preferred to provide feedback via the online survey where we received 675 responses.

What People Told Us

Focus Groups

Generally, the feedback from the focus groups was a huge amount of concern about not being able access a regular NHS dentist. There were themes that emerged from the groups, concerns were raised, and potential solutions were discussed.

Transport

The current proposal is to try and set up a large practice in Hereford city so it was important to try and seek the views of people from the market towns and surrounding rural areas to understand how these plans would affect them.

Mostly, people who had a car were happy to travel to Hereford with the priority of having access to an NHS dentist, however concerns were raised about congestion in certain areas of Hereford, for example, if someone was travelling from Ross, it can sometimes take double the amount of time to get into the centre due to traffic at peak times. There was also a concern about poor public transport, that has limited provision and that the cost would affect many people making it an unrealistic option.

The Leominster group commented that liaison with transport providers was essential as transport links are not always reliable from Leominster.

There were concerns from many of the market towns that public transport did not run later in the evenings (for example, the last bus to Peterchurch from Hereford is 6.04pm and for some of the other areas it is earlier) and therefore for some who may need evening appointments due to work commitments, this would make travelling to Hereford difficult.

There was a comment that even on the edge of Hereford city that public transport can be unreliable and not arrive as frequently as it is needed and that the schedule heavily reduces in the school holidays leaving it hard for people to rely on.

The Kington group said that the bus service to Hereford was every hour in the day until approximately 5.30pm and quite reliable, but not served in evenings.

Some of the older participants said that they were happy to drive now but were worried there could be a point in the future where this option wasn't available if they could no longer drive. It was also suggested that with the current cost of living crisis that car ownership could go down making it difficult for people to drive to a central location.

Despite the challenges of recruiting dentists to rural areas being explained, there was still the opinion that resources all seem to be directed to Hereford city and the market towns are at a disadvantage because of this, this view was of particular concern in Leominster, the second largest conurbation in the county.

It was highlighted within the focus groups that although the participants were mainly from the market towns, they acknowledged that people in more rural villages would find the use of public transport even more challenging.

Parking

With many people saying that they would travel by car to Hereford, it was highlighted that the chosen site for a surgery would need access to parking, but there was also a concern about the cost of parking.

Flexibility of Appointments

The option of early morning, evenings and weekend appointments was discussed at all the focus groups. In the groups where the participants were mainly retired, they said they would prefer and were able to do daytime appointments but acknowledged that people who worked during the day or had children would need the option of having early morning, evening and weekend appointments with early evening appointments being mentioned the most.

Focus Group – Armed Forces Community

During the promotion of this project, Healthwatch were contacted by representatives from the Herefordshire Armed Forces Covenant Partnership, as the problem of dental access was already highlighted as an issue for the families of serving personnel and those who have left the service and settled in the county.

This community share the current concerns and challenges as the rest of the public we have engaged with. However, family members of serving personnel have an added disadvantage due to frequently being posted to different locations. They find it even harder to access simple dental care due to being taken off dentist patient lists, then upon being posted to Herefordshire there is little or no chance of getting back on a patient list for a regular dentist in this area.

Quote from Q10 of the online survey

6

“As a mobile military family, it can be difficult to maintain good dental hygiene for myself & child when we are constantly placed on a waiting list to access a simple check-up. It is disappointing as a taxpayer that NHS services are very scarce and those practices offering NHS treatment are going private.

9

When presented with the new proposals for dental access in Hereford, representatives thought the armed forces community would be happy to travel into Hereford city.

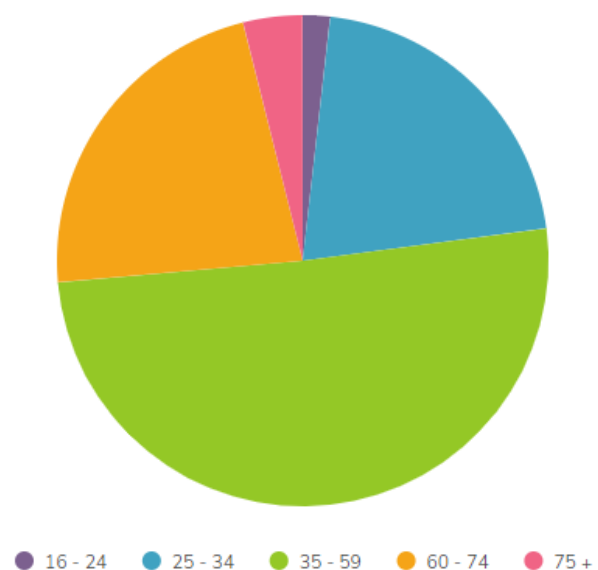
When asked about appointment times, it was felt that early morning, evening and weekend opportunities would be welcomed. Families can sometimes find it challenging making it to appointments when a partner is away and therefore for some, a Saturday morning would be the only realistic option. Similar to opinions from the rest of the public we have heard from, early mornings and evening appointments would definitely suit people who are working in the day or who have young people in school.

Survey Results

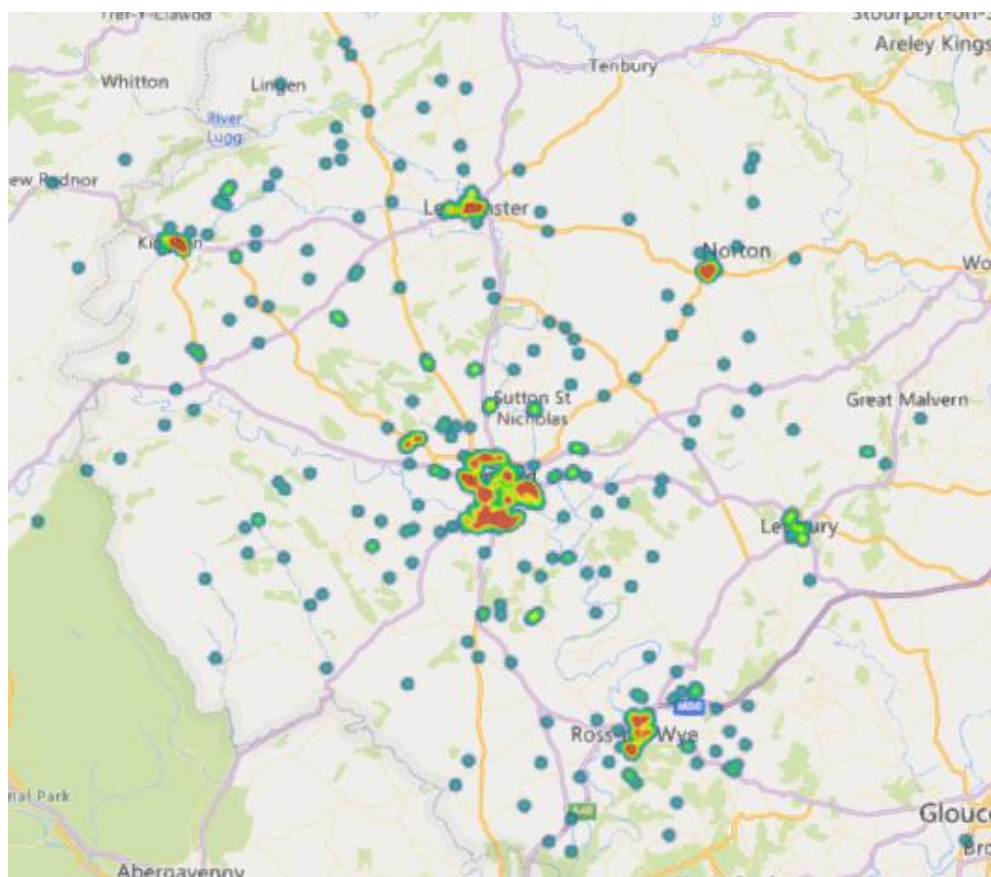
675 people responded to the survey.

The chart below demonstrates the range of ages of people that responded to the survey:

. What is your age?

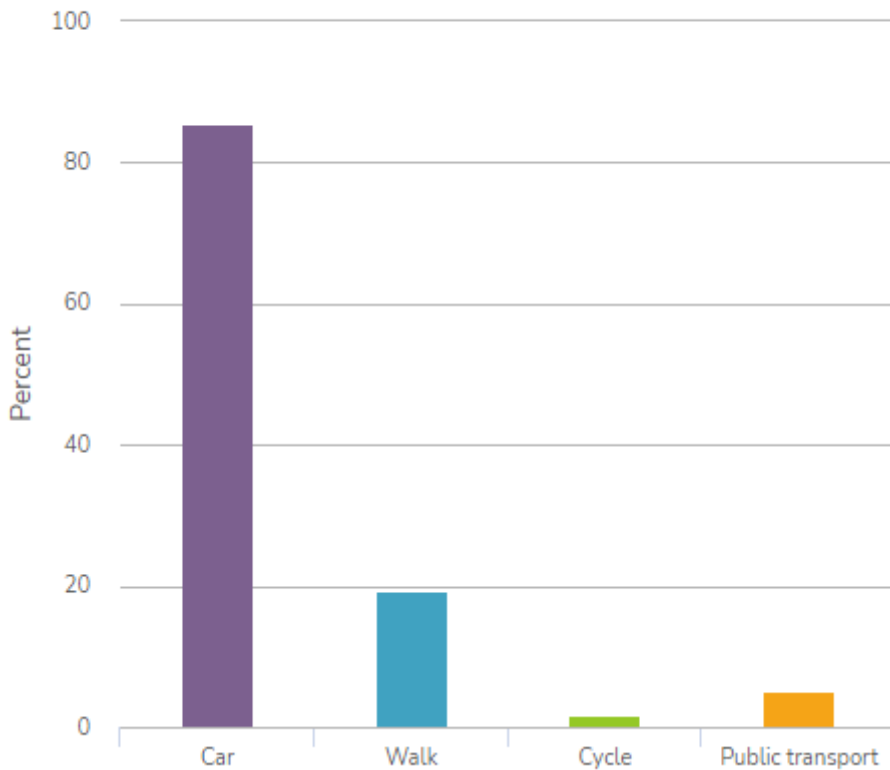


There was a wide geographical spread of responses across the county, which has meant we have captured a range of views from rural areas, market towns and the city. The heat map highlights this:



The graph below demonstrates what mode of transport people currently use to access dental care:

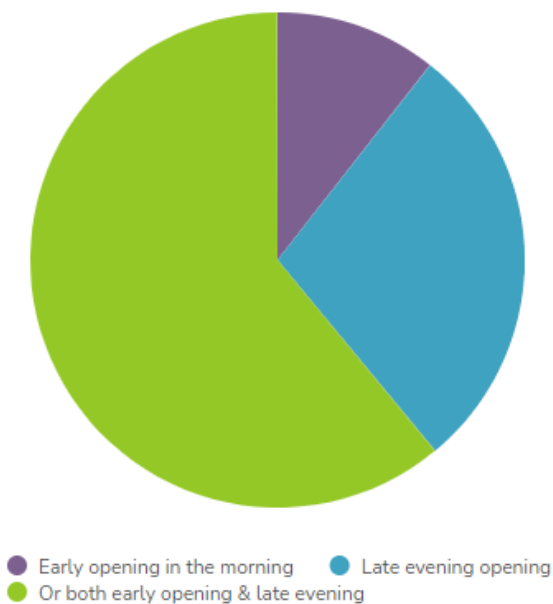
5. How did you or someone you care for travel to access a dentist? (Please select all responses that apply below)



A large majority of people (85.4%) use a car as a mode of transport. 19.2% walk to access dental care and then a much smaller proportion of people cycle or use public transport.

The pie chart below shows what people would prefer when they were asked about the appointment times:

7. If the service were able to offer appointments at flexible times would you prefer :



As shown, the biggest proportion of people say they would like the option of both early morning and late evening.

This is consistent with the message coming across at the focus groups, which acknowledged working people who would benefit from late evening and early morning as well as families who would prefer to avoid school times. People who were retired tended to respond that they would be happy with appointments in the daytime.

With a new plan being proposed to tackle the current challenges of access to dental care in Herefordshire, this chart shows the response of what people would be willing to do in order to travel to services in the future:

8. We know from previous patient feedback that patients would like to see a number of local dental practices across the county but if we were to offer services as a start in Hereford city with a plan to extend out to other areas later, would you be able / willing to travel to a central service for an interim period?



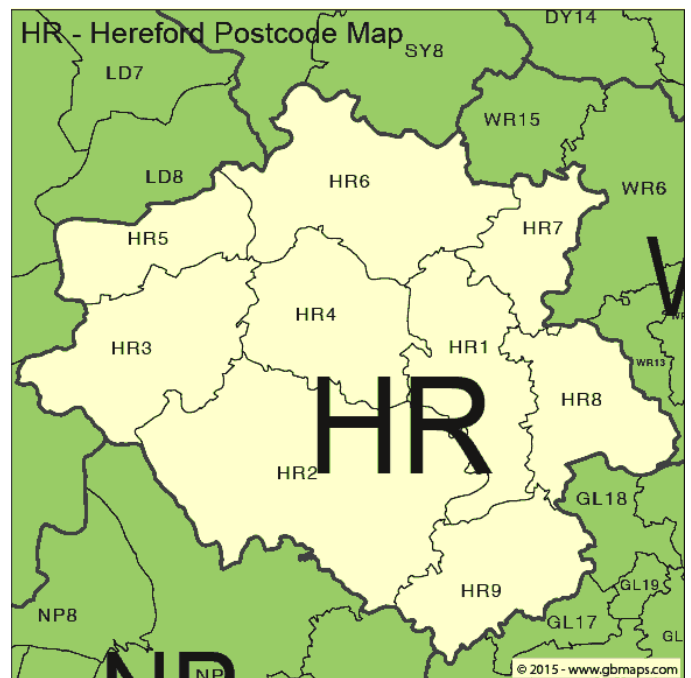
- Yes - I could travel and would be willing to do so
- Yes - I would be willing to travel if transport was provided
- Yes - I could travel but would prefer not to
- No - I would not be able to travel to a central location

The biggest proportion of people (62.5%) said that they could travel and would be willing to do so.

27.8% also said they could travel but would prefer not to.

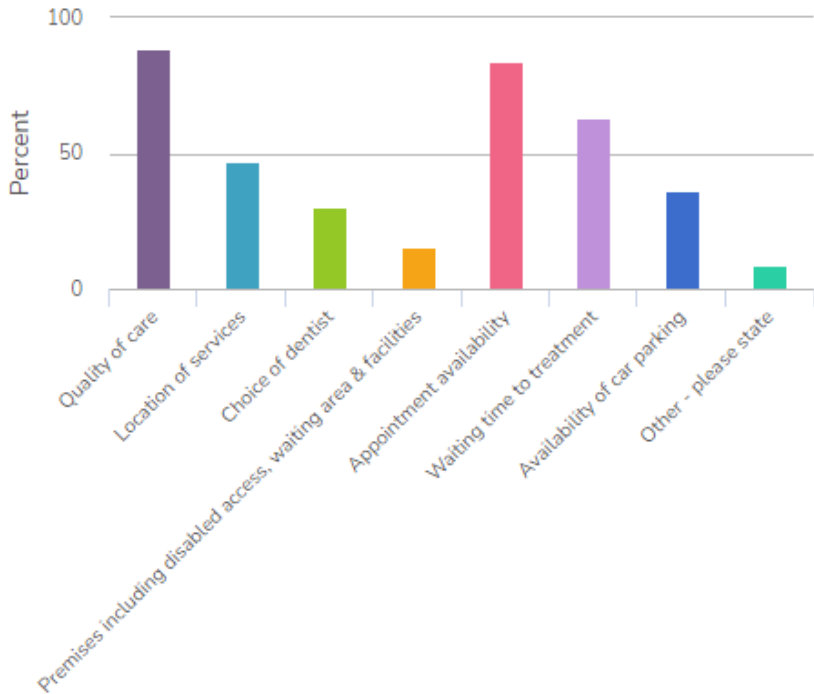
From the people that said that they would not be able to travel to a central location, the table below highlights which postcodes they are from:

Postcode Area	Number of people
HR9	14
HR2	10
HR6	7
HR7	5
HR5	6
HR1	3
HR4	3
HR8	2
Out of County	2
HR3	1



When asked what was important when visiting a dentist, the chart below highlights the aspects of care that are most valued:

9. What is important to you or someone you care for when visiting a dentist? (Please select all responses that apply below)



Quality of care had the most responses (88.6%), followed by appointment availability (84.1%).

When asked about anything else they would like to say about dental care in Herefordshire, there was a large response. The comments have been themed into categories and the top 10 responses are shown in the table below:

Comment / Theme	Number of Responses
No NHS Provision / Unable to get an NHS dentist	274
Have a dentist, but not able to make appointments or the dentist keeps cancelling them	57
Concerns about cost	38
My dentist has gone private, unable to find an NHS one	35
Can't afford to go private	23
Have had to travel out of the county for dental care	18

Have used the access centres	16
Poor care from current dentist	15
Have had no choice but to go private as can't get an NHS dentist	10
Happy with current dentist	6

Quotes from Q10 of the online survey



“Since moving back to Herefordshire in 2020 I have been unable to get a dentist who is taking on NHS patients. I have been having toothache on and off for a year but as a non-emergency no one will help. I am at the point of borrowing money off family to pay privately just to be seen. This is not something anyone should have to do. As with any medical care, the longer you leave it often the worse it gets. I am in the fortunate position to have a car and to be able to drive, but this is of no use when no surgery will accept new patients.”



“My dentist has said that they are not offering routine check-ups to me (NHS patient) yet has phoned my neighbours to invite them for check-ups as they are private. I cannot afford private dental care so it is vital to me that we can have access to NHS care.”



“I have lived in Herefordshire for 4 years and have not been able to register at a dental practice in all that time as an NHS patient. But always offered private which I cannot afford. Covid isn't the reason there are waiting lists and no appointments so it can't be continually blamed. I previously had to use the dental access centre as was refused at other practices prior to covid.”



“We have been unable to secure a dental appointment with my current dentist since October 2019. Our 6-year-old and 13 year old have been unable to be seen due to cancellations. Our NHS dentist has become partly private, and those patients appear to have been made a priority.”





"I was taken off the patient list because I had not attended for 3 years. This was due to the dentist repeatedly cancelling appointments, not me. I currently have two broken teeth and can only chew with my front teeth. I can't access emergency dental care as I am not in pain, and I can't find an NHS dentist in Hereford. I started with a private dentist but cannot afford to continue with this. I worry that my general health is being adversely affected by the lack of access to the dental treatment I desperately need."



"A lot of dentists seem to train & do NHS work for a minimum period, then start a private practice (according to staff where I go) surely their contract needs updating? e.g. staying in the NHS"



"It is beyond frustrating that we have an NHS dentist (albeit in Hay-on-Wye) but getting an appointment within a reasonable timeframe is practically impossible however in the next breath you are offered an appointment the next day if you pay for their 'options service'. When challenged about this we have been told the dentist is only required to do a few NHS slots and most of her time is focussed on private patients. We cannot afford to pay privately therefore we have no choice but to delay treatment often resulting in something that can be easily remedied becoming a much bigger issue. All dentists should be required to offer at least 50% NHS slots to practice ensuring those who cannot pay have access to the service. I am aware of a lot of people who are not seeing a dentist because they cannot get onto a list anywhere. This is not acceptable."



"I'm an NHS patient and every appointment my dentist is trying to sell me private treatment plans. If I were able to afford private treatment, then I wouldn't be an NHS patient but unfortunately, I am a working parent on a low income and in receipt of benefits. I find this to be extremely unprofessional and rude. A dentist is there to provide care and advice for their patients, not sell treatment plans to make more money."



A Full report of the raw data can be found in Appendix 5.

Conclusion

The clear issue from this report that the large majority of responses highlight is the significant lack of dental care in the county. We are aware that this is a national issue, but the problem seems to be even worse in Herefordshire and the public are now concerned about what will happen in the future for themselves and their children's oral health.

The report has highlighted some very serious concerns about the general state of people's oral health, the length of time it has been since people last saw a dentist (if ever, in some cases of children and young people) as well as people's worrying concerns over the cost of treatment. The current cost of living crisis will make the cost of dental care an even bigger burden, and potentially people will not even seek treatment due to the cost and travel.

When presented with the new plan to tackle the current challenges, many people feel that something would be better than nothing and with 85.4% of respondents saying they would use a car to travel to access dental care, this supports the idea of a central venue surgery, however with this large majority saying they would use a car, a suitable site would need to include parking or near access to parking.

Even though a large majority, have said they would use a car, it does still leave a proportion of people that do not have this choice. Unfortunately, the current dental access challenges increase health inequalities in the county. There is concern from all the market towns and rural areas about using public transport to come into Hereford for several reasons including the reliability, the cost and the limited timetable, particularly in the evenings. There are also concerns from people in the surrounding areas of Hereford city who may not be able to walk into the centre and therefore also rely on public transport or use of a car.

It was clear from the focus groups and a large majority of survey respondents that having the option of early morning and evening appointments was necessary to cater for people who are working in the day, but also for young people to avoid school times. This would also be necessary to tackle to huge amount of people who need access to a dentist who currently have no options.

The situation in Herefordshire with dental care is at a desperate point that people have said they will travel to Hereford, although there is also a feeling that the public would prefer to have services in their market towns and when the plan for a phased approach was explained, there were fears that this might not happen.

There are currently efforts being made to educate adults and children about dental care, although this project highlights the need to go further with education, particularly around preventative care. With rising fears about the cost of care with private or NHS treatment, it will become increasingly important to educate around maintaining good preventative oral health to reduce the need for dental treatment in the future.

Additional Solutions

- Designated appointment days for certain market towns / areas of the county to coincide with increased transport on those days. This could include public transport or the use of community transport.
- Voucher scheme for public transport for a subsidised rate for the journey with potential use of QR codes.
- The suggestion of a mobile dental clinic vehicle to travel around to different parts of the county was discussed on several occasions at the focus groups.
- Catch up programme for young people. It was suggested that education and childcare settings could take all their young people into a central venue surgery. The project has heard of huge numbers of young people that have not seen a dentist in years, if ever and therefore an intense programme initially for young people could avoid bigger problems in the future.
- There was a suggestion that lower skilled professionals could be trained to do basic check-ups, for example, fluoride polish or dental therapy.
- Due to discussions about poor public transport and traffic congestion particularly in south Hereford, there was a suggestion of splitting a surgery to have a venue north of the city barrier and a venue south of the city, however, the duplication of staff and equipment that this would result in was acknowledged.

Appendix 1

Herefordshire PDS Dental Service Survey Print Out version

Appendix 2

Social Media and website summary

Appendix 3

Engagement on Dental Services in Herefordshire - Promotion list

Appendix 4

<https://tinyurl.com/DentistryVideo>

Appendix 5

https://healthwatchherefordshirecou-my.sharepoint.com/personal/christine_healthwatchherefordshire_co_uk/Documents/Shared/Project%20work/Dentistry%202022/Appendices/Final%20raw%20report%20from%20online%20survey.docx



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