Finding an NHS Dentist

in Bath & North East Somerset

Background

In January 2022 we contacted every dentist in Bath and North East Somerset to establish if any were taking on new patients. The report follows up six months later.

Methodology

We carried out a review to ensure that every dentist in Bath and North East Somerset was contacted.

A volunteer contacted all the dentists to understand if they were taking on new patients of any age.

Findings

Are there any Dentists taking on NHS patients in B&NES?

At this time no Dentists in Bath and North East Somerset is taking on new patients. This remains the most reported issue to us at Healthwatch Bath & North East Somerset

Are there less Dentists with NHS Contracts?

Of the dentists contacted in B&NES two indicated that they had ceased to take on any NHS patients permanently and had handed back their NHS contract completely.

One practice explained anonymously that "the income from the NHS to cover the treatment did not meet their outgoings, so it was not economically viable for them to continue as an NHS provider of dental services".

Is there emergency treatment available?

There is emergency treatment available through 111 and the Dental Access Centre at Riverside in Bath.

However, we are hearing from feedback that it is difficult to get an appointment and if you are already registered with a dentist and they are not able to provide an emergency appointment that it is very hard to obtain one.

What are Healthwatch doing about this?

Thanks to you, NHS England will take several steps to ensure better dental support for people with complex problems and improve the information for those trying to find an NHS dentist.

NHS England (NHSE) has announced on `19th July 2022 several steps to ensure better dental support for people with complex problems and improve the information for those trying to find an NHS dentist.

The stories you shared about the difficulties people had in getting a dental appointment have shown the impact of the poor state of dental services, leading to NHSE bringing in these changes.

What action has been taken?

NHS England has announced several changes to the contract with dentists who provide NHS care, including:

- Increasing the payments for dentists when treating patients with complex needs, for example, people needing work done on three or more teeth;

- Requiring dental practices to regularly update the national directory on www.nhs.net to clarify if they are taking on NHS patients; and

- Moving resources from dental practices that are underperforming.

What is our response?

Responding, Chris McCann, Healthwatch director of campaigns, policy and insight, said:

"Thousands of patients have spoken up about their struggles accessing an NHS dentist over the last few years. This announcement shows the power of their voices, with the NHS listening and taking action.

"The changes should mean it is easier for people to find a dentist taking on new NHS patients. Those with more complex dental problems will also be better able to access care because of the shift in how the NHS pays dentists. Ultimately, we hope these

combined measures will end long waiting times, the extended periods of pain many people suffer, and the extreme cases of DIY dentistry we have seen.

"However, these reforms need to be just the start if we are to create an NHS that is able to deliver good dental care for all."

What else have Healthwatch England done?

Healthwatch England commissioned a representative poll of 2,026 adults based in England found nearly half (49%) of respondents, who had an opinion about NHS charges, felt NHS dental charges were unfair.

The Poll which looked at people's experiences of NHS dentistry, including costs associated with dental care, found the following:

- 54% of people who had an NHS dentist appointment, had a problem. Of these, more than three in five (63%) respondents found it difficult to book an appointment. More than three in ten (31%) couldn't access all the treatments they needed.

- 46% of people who had an NHS dentist appointment, had issues with the costs associated with their NHS dental care. Of these:

- More than a third (34%) of respondents said they had to pay privately to get all the required treatment;

- nearly a quarter (24%) reported they felt pressured to pay privately when they booked their dental appointment. Similar numbers (24%) said their NHS dentist didn't explain the costs before starting treatment;

- nearly one in five (17%) reported that their NHS dentist charged more for the treatments than the advertised NHS charges.

- 21% of people who did not have any NHS dentist appointment, suffered as a result. Of this, one in three (34%) respondents said a lack of access to dental care led to more serious problems, making them feel anxious. Others said that a lack of timely dental care made it hard to eat or speak properly (19%) and made them avoid going out (16%).

We are hearing similar findings across Bath and North East Somerset.

Fewer NHS dentists

The findings come as more than 2,000 dentists quit the NHS last year, according to recent data obtained by the Association of Dental Groups, suggesting a growing trend toward private provision. This is again something we have seen in Bath and North East Somerset.

Healthwatch have repeatedly raised concerns over the last two years as the twin crisis of access and affordability has continued to grow. Between October 2021 and March 2022, the Healthwatch network heard from 4,808 people about their experiences of dental care, many of whom were struggling to access timely care.

Healthwatch England are making repeated calls on NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care to put a reformed dental contract in place before formal responsibility for dental services passes to the 42 new Integrated Care Systems in April 2023.

Louise Ansari, national director at Healthwatch England said:

"Access to NHS dentistry has been one of the most significant issues people have raised with us in the last two years. There is now a deepening crisis in dental care, leaving people struggling to get treatment or regular check-ups on the NHS.

"The shortage of NHS appointments is creating a two-tier dental system, which widens inequalities and damages the health of the most disadvantaged communities. With millions of households bearing the brunt of the escalating living costs, private treatment is simply not an option, and even NHS charges can be a challenge. This needs urgent attention if the Government is to achieve its levelling up plan and tackle health disparities.

"We are once again calling on the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England for greater ambition and urgency from NHS dental reform plans to create a fair and inclusive dental service. We strongly recommend that a new dental contract is in place before Integrated Care Systems take on formal responsibility for dentistry from next April."

What can you do to find a dentist?

Use the NHS website to search for a dentist near you. Find a dentist - NHS (www.nhs.uk) The site also provides information on which dental practices are currently accepting new patients, whether they offer urgent appointments, and how other people have rated the service.

While this is a good starting point to finding a local dentist, people often tell us that these records aren't always kept updated, so you should contact the practice directly to find out more information. If the records are out of date, you should let the practice know.

You can also visit a dentist outside your local area if it's more convenient. For example, if you prefer to see a dentist near where you work.

How do I complain if I cannot find a dentist?

First of all, let us know, the more complaints we receive locally the more evidence we have to take to the local NHS.

You should also notify NHS England about the issue, as it has a duty to provide routine and urgent dental care across the country. Find out how to make a complaint here.

What to do if you have a dental emergency?

If you need immediate care for your teeth, you should:

- Ask your regular dentist whether they can offer an emergency appointment.

- Phone NHS111 who can locate an urgent dental service.

- Visit A&E if you experience severe pain, heavy bleeding, or injuries to the face, mouth or teeth.

How much does dental treatment cost?

Most people will have to pay towards the cost of dental treatment, but some patients are exempt.

A basic routine examination, which includes diagnosis, advice, a scale and polish if clinically needed and some preventative care, costs £23.80 now. However, if you require further dental treatment this will be an additional cost.

Dental practices usually offer both NHS and private dental care. You should check whether you are paying for NHS, private treatment, or both before you begin your treatment.

NHS dentists should always:

- Explain which treatments are available on the NHS.

- Explain which treatments are only available privately.

- Make sure you know how much your NHS treatment and private treatment will cost.

Find out more about what you should expect to pay for treatment.

How can you check whether your dentist is qualified?

A list of all qualified dentists in the UK is available via the register of the General Dental Council (GDC), which is the regulatory body for the profession.

Do note that you don't register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP. You can choose to go to any dentist who is able to offer an appointment. Once a course of treatment is finished, the dentist is not obliged to see you in future. When you finish a course of treatment, you may want to book your next appointment to avoid problems in future.

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