



Experiences of Dentistry in East Sussex

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healthwatch
East Sussex

Context: Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

The current situation

Context

Access to dentistry services, especially NHS provision, has been a long-standing problem and was an issue before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. However, this has become exacerbated by the backlog created by the lockdown, combined with ongoing NHS contractual and wider dental workforce capacity issues.

These conditions have had a significant impact on people of all ages seeking to maintain their oral health through regular preventative visits to a dentist or hygienist, and those seeking routine or emergency dental treatment. We acknowledge the significant contributions made by dental professionals in providing services before, during and after the lockdown, and wish to collaborate with them to develop sustainable, effective and accessible dental services in East Sussex.

What Healthwatch has heard

Over the last two years, dentistry has consistently been in the top three reasons people in East Sussex leave feedback or make an enquiry with Healthwatch.

The feedback we have received indicates an overall decline in satisfaction with dental services when compared to pre-pandemic levels, but this is more pronounced amongst users of NHS services than for those paying for private dental services.

This primarily relates to challenges in obtaining timely access to appointments and treatment, both amongst existing patients and those seeking to 'join' practices, especially those seeking NHS treatment.

We do receive positive feedback on people's dentistry experiences which indicates that there is variability in the way services are provided, and this variation may be worth exploring further.

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Shortages of dental provision

Feedback suggests there is a widespread shortage of dentists in East Sussex, with some areas effectively being 'dental deserts' due to shortages of dentists or local demand overwhelming the available supply of appointments. Shortages of hygienists and other specialists are also reported.

Self-treatment

We have heard from people who have resorted to 'DIY dentistry' as a last resort when faced with significant barriers or delays for accessing dental treatment. This may further risk their wider and long-term health. Some people feel left to self-manage dental pain for extended periods.

Community dental services

Concerns have been raised about the status of community dental services, and the impacts of the pandemic in providing dentistry to those in care homes, the housebound and homeless, and people with medical conditions or a disability. A lack of dental provision can affect their quality of life.

Impact on other NHS services

Feedback has highlighted that challenges in accessing routine and emergency dental treatment mean people are forced to use other NHS services such as GPs, Pharmacies, NHS 111 and A&E departments for assistance. However, these are often only able to offer short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions. The impact on other NHS services is currently challenging to measure, as monitoring of dental themes by other NHS services is often not collated.

Provision of information

A significant challenge across this dental crisis has been the lack of robust public information. Details of which dentists are offering NHS treatment and accepting new patients is often out-of-date or unclear, leaving patients to 'ring round' practices to find one offering appointments.

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Cost of living crisis

A significant additional concern that has arisen during 2022, has been the 'cost of living' crisis which may also impact on people's ability to pay either NHS and private charges for dental treatment. Healthwatch is concerned that this may serve as an additional disincentive to seek dental treatment, especially if the only viable option for timely treatment is private dentistry, potentially leading to worse outcomes in the longer-term, particularly amongst those on low incomes.

The Future

The shift in the commissioning of NHS dental provision from NHS England to Integrated Care Systems represents a significant opportunity to reflect on the current situation, and to bring stakeholders together to set a positive future trajectory for dentistry provision in Sussex.

This could:

- Engage with dentists and other oral health professionals to develop a comprehensive understanding of workforce, capacity and operational issues in Sussex.
- Map out dental provision and explore how a better geographical distribution may be delivered.
- Review community dental service provision and identify plans for future development.
- Collate the feedback of dentistry service users to understand their issues and concerns, but also preferences for future provision.
- Identify and set objectives for changes that deliver tangible benefits in terms of oral health outcomes across Sussex.

Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

What have we heard?

Collecting your views

Between 1st November 2020 and 1st November 2022, Healthwatch received 24 [Feedback Centre](#) reviews and 214 enquiries to our [Information & Signposting service](#) related to dentistry themes.

In early 2022, Healthwatch East Sussex published the findings of our public survey of [residents' experiences of dental services in East Sussex](#) since March 2020 and the results of our [Mystery Shopping exercise](#) which explored whether dental practices in the county were accepting NHS patients.

We have used these sources to draw out the key themes in the feedback that we have received on dentistry and summarised these below.

Finding a dentist accepting new patients

Finding an NHS dentist accepting patients is the most common dentistry-related enquiry our Information & Signposting service receives, and it is also one of the most challenging for us to respond to constructively.

When we undertook our Mystery Shopping in late 2021 only one-in-ten dental practices in East Sussex were accepting new patients for NHS treatment on an unrestricted basis. Given the number of enquiries we receive on this theme, it is unlikely that this picture has changed and possibly worsened.

Approximately a quarter of East Sussex dental practices we spoke to received 20 or more enquiries a week from people seeking to join as NHS patients. This incurred call and time costs for patients and placed additional demands on the administrative capacity of dental practices.

Only one-in-three respondents to our dental experiences survey who had tried to become a patient at a dental practice had been successful. Some were joining as private patients, often because they could not find practices accepting patients for NHS treatment, and sometimes as they had an urgent treatment need.

Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

What have we heard?

Challenges in accessing routine and emergency dental care

We have consistently received feedback on the challenges that people are facing in getting timely access to appointments, with long waits even where services were available, especially for NHS appointments. Some people must now travel long distances for dental treatment as practices accepting patients are not close.

Anxieties are also raised about the potential long-term impacts on oral health due to variable access to preventative services such as check-ups and hygienists.

Impacts of waiting times

Waiting times for routine and emergency dental treatments are leaving many people very frustrated, with some experiencing significant negative physical and mental effects from the delays. This can leave them resorting to DIY dentistry. Concerns are also high amongst parents for their offspring's oral health.

Shortages of dentists and other staff

Staff shortages were highlighted by both patients and practices as a driver of limited delivery capacity, mostly a lack of dentists, but also dental nurses, hygienists and other staff. People often told us about their dentists retiring or moving elsewhere.

Knock-on effects of delays

A lack of timely access to dental check-ups and treatment can impinge on people's ability to receive treatment for other conditions, as these can be pre-requisites for operations and other procedures.

Dentists giving up NHS contracts

We heard from dental practices which had decided to no longer deliver NHS dental contracts. Unfortunately, this isn't always clearly communicated, and patients told us they mistakenly contacted multiple practices seeking NHS treatment as they continue to be listed by NHSE or their own websites as delivering NHS services.

Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

What have we heard?

NHS versus Private dental provision

The public and patients are often confused as to why they can be offered private dental appointments and treatment quite quickly, but cannot get the same for NHS treatment, even at the same practice. Some people pay for private treatment due to their inability to access NHS treatment in a timely way. We have also heard of practices accepting children as NHS patients if their parents join privately.

Information on Dental services

Information on which dental practices are accepting new patients, especially NHS patients, is often challenging to access, unclear and out-of-date. This includes the NHS 'Find a dentist' website and those of individual dental practices. Regular information updates tend not to be shared by dentistry commissioners and providers through social media and other public channels in the same way as for other services. This also includes barriers in obtaining clear information on how to access community and specialist dentistry.

Patients being 'de-registered' or removed from practice 'lists'

We have heard from people who have been unable to book appointments or deliberately avoided using their dental practice during the pandemic, who have subsequently been told they will need to access services elsewhere. Some are not told this may happen or has happened and are only informed when they seek an appointment or treatment. They are then forced to seek out another practice accepting new patients, in-turn placing pressure on other practices.

Lack of clarity or clear information about dental treatment costs

Some people remain confused about treatment plans, eligibility for free NHS treatment, and the costs and charges for different treatments, especially NHS compared to private. This means they may be paying unnecessarily. Clarity in the communication of costs and charges remains an issue. Some patients highlighted feeling it was inappropriate to have financial discussions whilst in the 'dentists chair', especially where they need urgent or emergency treatment.

Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

What have we heard?

Repeated cancellations

Enquiries have highlighted that people are regularly experiencing routine appointments being cancelled at short-notice. We have heard from people who have said this has happened to them and have questioned whether this is how dental practices are managing demand?

This can impact on people's ability to schedule check-ups and treatment, especially those whose work makes it challenging to re-arrange suitable times.

Community dental services

Concerns have been raised about the dental services provided to or available for those in care homes, those who are housebound or homeless, or those with medical conditions or disabilities. This is particularly concerning as these may be the most vulnerable, may be disproportionately affected and not in a position to access alternatives.

Move towards yearly rather than six-monthly checkups

We have heard from individuals who are frustrated that their previous six-monthly check ups have now become yearly (or less frequent) check-ups and they have raised concerns that there is a shift from a preventative approach to dentistry to a remedial approach – which could cause problems for the future.

Positive experiences of NHS dentistry

The public feedback we have received, suggests that many people's frustrations with dentistry is primarily around barriers to registration for 'new' NHS patients and lack of access to NHS dental appointments and treatment. However, when individuals do manage to see an NHS or a private dentist, the standard of treatment and care is generally good.

Negative feedback on dental services in East Sussex

"Couldn't get emergency appointment and regular appointment cancelled. Had four trips to A&E (for two separate incidents) for antibiotics and an emergency extraction."

"Can't get an NHS dentist that I can get to & can't afford private."

"Phoned 7+ dentists most months, none of which can take NHS patients but will take private patients."

"Still can't see a dentist unless for an emergency. My dentist also retired during the pandemic and the practice can't find a replacement."

"Had to go private as NHS were only offering to do emergency appointments."

"No routine appointments available to me for 2 years. I phoned every month only to be told nothing available to me."

"What websites say and what is actually available are two different things."

Positive feedback on dental services in East Sussex

"Arthur Blackman clinic was exceptionally well run for emergency treatment and the on-call Dentist was very good."

"Fantastic – immediate appointment and my husband too on another occasion."

"Truly excellent service: all well explained: intervals between treatments minimised to suit me: results, so far so good! Price comparatively reasonable would happily recommend."

"Excellent service. They contacted us to let us know our review was due. Made a double appt so that we did not have to travel into Lewes twice. Seen promptly. No problems at all."

"EDS are brilliant, my normal dentist surgery is appalling, had an extraction done and ended up in A&E as it was done so badly. GP practice have helped out with getting alternative antibiotics to the ones the dentists are prescribed."

"Really good seen within the hour. Going on holiday that day and they fitted me in. Brilliant service."

"The emergency dental services are excellent and have got me out of real pain. Their service is outstanding."



Dentistry: Our response so far

Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

The steps that Healthwatch has taken

Responding to your questions and enquiries

Our [Information & Signposting service](#) operates to support and advise people who have a query, and to signpost anyone who needs to make a complaint.

We have received and responded to 214 enquiries related to dentistry since November 2020.

Much of our work has involved supporting people to identify dental practices accepting new patients, especially NHS patients, primarily through signposting to the Sussex Dental Helpline.

We have also supported people to identify other services that can assist them with dental pain, share feedback with dental practices, make complaints and better understand NHS dental charges.

Communications

We have also pro-actively shared the most recent advice and information about how best to access mainstream and emergency dental services, through our website, newsletter, social media and in response to one-to-one enquiries.

We have shared updates provided by NHS England and Healthwatch England on dentistry with the public.

We published '[NHS dentistry what you need to know](#)' and '[Top ten tips when accessing NHS dentistry](#)' articles to support the public in accessing NHS dentistry appropriately.

Dentistry in East Sussex in 2022

The steps that Healthwatch has taken

Healthwatch in Sussex

Healthwatch East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove have collaborated to raise awareness of the experiences of local people in relation to dentistry. This includes with NHS Sussex commissioners, NHS England, Local Dental Committees and Healthwatch England.

Through public and patient feedback, we heard that many people were unclear on the differences between NHS and private dentists, what dental treatments they were entitled to via the NHS, what the associated charges were and who these applied to.

In response, we collaborated to produce our ['Dentistry – A Healthwatch guide to your rights and accessing the treatment you need'](#) guide to support people's understanding of these themes.

It also outlines how to find and register with a dentist, how to feedback or complain and information to help people get support in an emergency. We have shared and promoted this widely.

Healthwatch England and the Healthwatch network

Healthwatch at local, regional and national level have regularly highlighted to NHS England and other stakeholders the significant impacts that access to dentistry services are having on the population.


Healthwatch East Sussex have contributed our intelligence, insight and reports to Healthwatch England and participated in events to support the Healthwatch network develop a holistic picture of the state of dentistry at a local, regional and national level.



Dentistry: Our questions



Our questions on dentistry provision

1. What steps has and is the Sussex Integrated Care System (ICS) taking to plan for it taking responsibility for NHS dentistry commissioning in Sussex in April 2023?
 2. How will NHS dentistry workforce and contracting issues be resolved?
 3. How have other services (including the NHS, Care and VCSE organisations) been affected by the issues facing dentistry provision?
 4. How effective were the additional funds provided by Government in early 2022 to support the provision of additional capacity in NHS Dentistry? What benefits did they bring to East Sussex?
 5. How are patient and user experiences of dental services being monitored in East Sussex/Sussex?
 6. How will the long-term impacts of a lack of access to dentistry provision, especially NHS dentistry, be monitored in East Sussex?
 7. What plans are in place to support those affected by the lack of access to affordable and timely dental services, including preventative, routine and emergency treatment?
 8. What impacts might the cost-of-living crisis have on people's ability to pay for/use either NHS or private dental treatment?
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