

Dentistry: A call for dentists to improve access for NHS patients

November 2022

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Introduction

Healthwatch Wakefield is your local health and social care champion. From Overton to Knottingley and everywhere in between, we find out what communities want from health and social care services, provide people with information and advice about local services, and we make sure NHS leaders and other decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care.

In the last 12 months, between November 2021 and November 2022, we received 129 items of feedback or enquiries about NHS dentists in total. 94 people gave us feedback on their current practice or the difficulties they are facing finding a new practice. 62 included a request for support from people looking to find an NHS dental practice, and one complaint. Please note some feedback contain more than one topic.

Of the 94 pieces of feedback:

15 per cent, or 14, were positive feedback

13 per cent, or 12, were mixed or neutral feedback

72 per cent, or 68, were negative feedback or areas for improvement

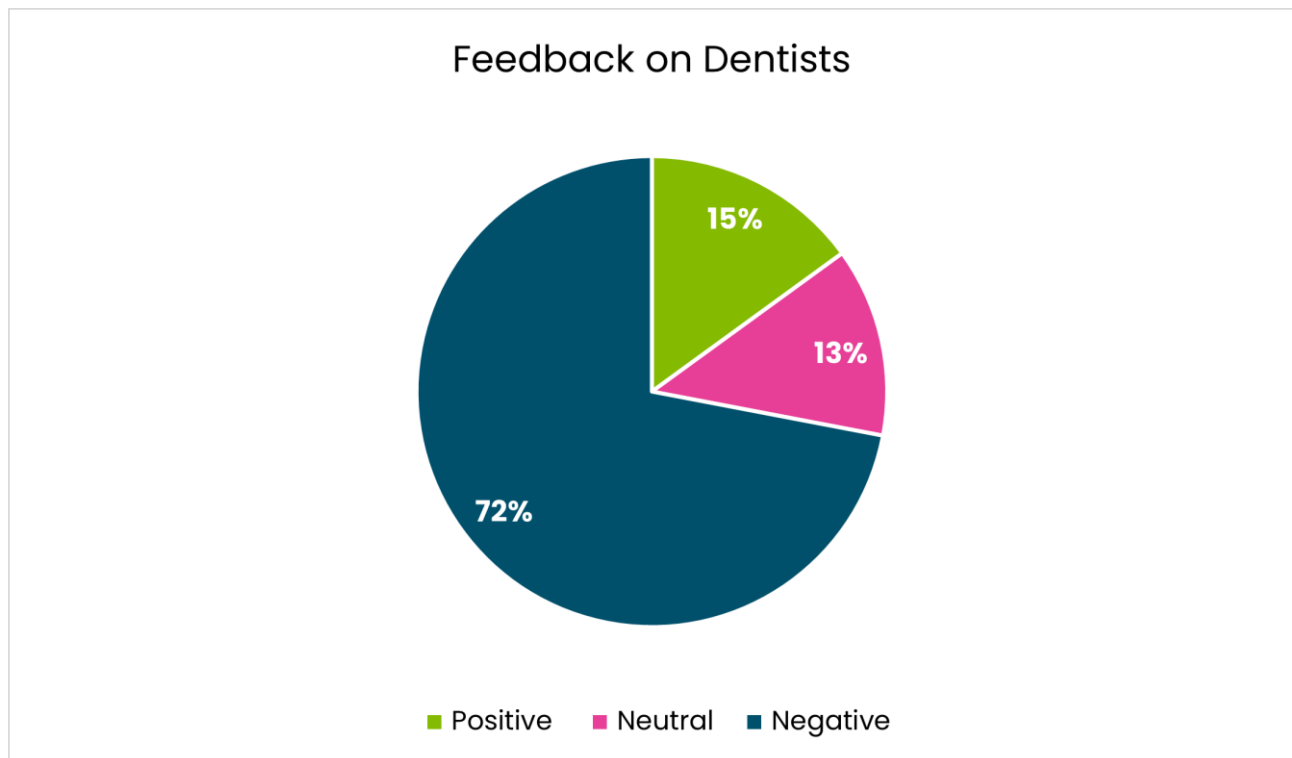


Chart: Feedback on Dentists

What are you telling us?

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw an increase in people telling us they found it hard to access an NHS dentist, and access to NHS dental care continues to be one of the main issues we hear about from the public. Difficulties getting support has led to many people living in pain. In some extreme cases, people take matters into their own hands, resorting to DIY dentistry. In short, people are struggling to find an NHS dentist appointment.

“I cannot get an NHS dentist and told up to 3 years wait list. I’m in desperate need of dental treatment, I’m in pain.”

“I have been trying for over a year to find a dentist that is taking on NHS patients but the only ones that are, have waiting lists of over 2 years. I need dental treatment now”.

Patient story

One local resident recently told us their story, she has been an NHS patient at the same practice for many years now. Recently her practice informed her that they had made the decision to move away from the NHS and will no longer be seeing patients under the NHS from 1 January 2023. She said:

“They sent me an email saying they are going fully private. Also, that it would take a £45 payment to secure an appointment for an examination. Then it recommends the plan I will be put on, which start at £16 per month. I’ve heard stories about people not being able to find a dentist, so I paid the £45 to get an appointment in February.”

She is not alone. According to recent data obtained by the Association of Dental Groups, more than 2,000 dentists quit the NHS last year, highlighting a growing trend toward private provision.

National context

These issues are being heard across the country. In August 2022, the BBC reported that nine in ten NHS dental practices across the UK are not accepting new adult patients for treatment under the health service. The BBC also reported that in a third of the UK’s more than 200 council areas, no dentists were taking on adult NHS patients and eight in ten NHS practices are not taking on children.

Healthwatch England also reported that 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.

Louise Ansari, national director at Healthwatch England recently 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.”

The most recent NHS England Dental Public Health newsletter has highlighted a few recent developments. Such as the introduction of a one-off payment to assist local NHS dental providers in the recruitment and longer-term retention of dentists in targeted areas of high deprivation, patient need and local intelligence, or the inclusion of Oral Health as a focus for Children and Young People within the Core20Plus5 programme to address the backlog for tooth extractions in hospitals for under 10's.

What are Healthwatch Wakefield doing to improve the situation?

Championing improvements to dentist provision

We are making sure your voice is heard within local and national decision making groups. Locally, we sit on the Oral Health Advisory Group, which provides advice and support on the Council's oral health responsibilities where we regularly share anonymised feedback. Nationally, our CEO, Gary Jevon, spoke to a Select Committee Parliamentary Briefing, with The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP and Sir Robert Francis KC, highlighting local issues and discussing the new NHS dentist contract. Following this there has been a series of changes announced which can be directly linked back to this meeting, and the evidence submitted by our CEO.

In January 2022, NHS England announced £50 million additional funding for dentistry. We are pleased to see the Government and NHS England act. However, a freedom of information request¹ submitted in August 2022 shows that just £14 million was spent which resulted in an additional 62,662 courses of treatment provided under the scheme. Within the North East and

¹ <https://opendata.nhsbsa.net/dataset/foi-25546>

Yorkshire this was £1,980,962 spent under the scheme resulting in an additional 6,615 treatments. More needs to be done.

On Monday 28 November 2022, the government announced² changes to the dental services contract including increasing the payments for dentists when dealing with patients with complex needs, for example, people needing work done on three or more teeth; and requiring dental practices to regularly update the national directory on www.nhs.net to clarify if they are taking on NHS patients.

Health Minister Neil O'Brien said about the changes:

“It will not solve all the problems overnight, but it will help improve access and ensure the system supports dentists and their teams.”

We will continue to monitor the feedback we receive and highlight issues as they arise, and we will continue to work with our partners, including Healthwatch England and NHS England, to ensure that people's views are able to influence the future of NHS dentistry.

Supporting people to find local dentist provision

We regularly signpost people to the NHS website³ where you are able to use your location to search for dental practices. The webpage says whether the practice is taking on new NHS patients and when the page was last updated. NHS Digital has launched an email campaign to encourage dental practices to update nhs.uk profiles and they are improving the process for practices to provide this information online. Compliance will be monitored quarterly through National Health Service dental contracts and NHS Digital aim for this to be implemented by the end of 2022. Locally, despite multiple calls for these pages to be updated some practices have not updated their webpage since 2011.

Furthermore, those that state they are taking on new NHS patients are usually operating a waiting list. The best way to find out if there is capacity on waiting lists is by frequently calling to ask.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-measures-to-improve-access-to-dental-care>

³ <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist>

Recommendations

1. The Wakefield Health and Wellbeing Board produces and publishes a Dental Needs Assessment to highlight the level of NHS dentist provision needed across Wakefield District.
2. The Wakefield District Health and Care Partnership work closely with the West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board to ensure there is sufficient sustainable NHS dentist provision for each community across the district.
3. NHS Dentist practices to update the NHS website regularly, showing if they are taking on new patients, even if it is just a small number of patients, in line with the NHS Dental Contract.
4. Healthwatch Wakefield to start a programme of cold calling dentists across the district to see if they are taking on NHS patients, and if so, are they updating the NHS dentist website. We will continue to report our findings.



healthwatch
Wakefield

Healthwatch Wakefield
The Plex
15 Margaret street
Wakefield
WF1 2DQ

www.healthwatchwakefield.co.uk

telephone: 01924 787379

mobile: If you are Deaf, you can text us on 07885 913396

email: enquiries@healthwatchwakefield.co.uk

twitter: @healthywakey

Facebook: [Facebook.com/HealthwatchWakefield](https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchWakefield)