Dental queries received by Healthwatch Cheshire

January 2022 to October 2022

healthwatch
Cheshire West

healthwatch
Cheshire East

Background

Since June 2020, Healthwatch Cheshire has received increasing numbers of enquiries asking for details of local dental practices taking on new NHS patients across Cheshire. In April 2021, Healthwatch published a report summarising the main issues raised by people in regard to dentistry https://healthwatchcwac.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Dental-Issues-Healthwatch-Cheshire-February-2021.pdf.

A follow up report was published in November 2021.

https://healthwatchcwac.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Dental-queries-received-by-Healthwatch-Cheshire-April-December-2021.pdf

The reports, along with all comments and feedback received, were shared with the individual dental providers, and NHS England who commission dentistry services.

As we approach the end of 2022, the main themes and issues raised by people via Healthwatch are similar to previous years:

- Accessing and registering with an NHS dentist
- Lengthy waiting lists to register with an NHS dentist and often only available miles away from home
- Having to use private dentists they cannot afford
- Lengthy wait for appointments with the dentist they are registered with
- Being deregistered by their dentist as they are deemed inactive
- Lack of follow up treatment available after emergency procedures
- Access to accurate information.

The number of people contacting us regarding NHS dentistry remains high and this report shares the queries and comments Healthwatch Cheshire are receiving in more detail. The report will be shared with individual dental providers and NHS England to ensure people's voices are heard.

We have assisted people by signposting and offering advice where appropriate, in particular highlighting the NHS Find a Dentist service and the Merseyside and Cheshire Emergency Dental Helpline so they are aware what support is available.

Number of queries received relating to dentists

The number of queries received by telephone, email or via our website relating to dentistry across all of Cheshire between January 2022 and October 2022 is detailed below:

Month	Number of queries
January	4
February	5
March	16
April	34
May	13
June	20
July	21
August	27
September	14
October	5
Total	**159**

Whilst the number of official queries is less than last year (April to October 2021 =190 versus April to October 2022 = 134), in general conversation during engagement events, people frequently remark in passing that it's difficult to get an NHS dentist. The situation appears to be escalating, as minor dental problems become more persistent and serious due to lack of treatment. People are more aware across the country and have friends or relatives who are trying to find a dentist, even if they themselves are not

Main themes and issues

The main themes and issues remain consistent with our 2021 reports – **being unable to access or register with an NHS dentist** is still the most common query. There have been more comments from people resorting to accessing **private dentistry** due to symptoms getting progressively worse and feeling they have no other option. This is particularly apparent for those who need a course of treatment. Even if they are registered with an NHS dentist, funding restrictions can mean private treatment is the only option to treat more complex cases. Others without access to an NHS dentist or the means to go private, end up going untreated and having to seek emergency care.

As in previous reports, people have shared their experiences of being told they are **no longer registered with the practice** as they have been deemed inactive. Many said it was following the COVID period but this was not always taken into account by the practice. Whilst Healthwatch Cheshire is aware that there is no formal system of registration with a dentist, the public do not understand that is the case.

A number of comments were from patients who, because of years of being unable to access an NHS dentist, have had to seek **emergency treatment**. In many cases the treatment they received was to solve the immediate problem, but underlying dental issues remained. This resulted in further emergency treatment or accessing other NHS services such as 111 or their GP. These additional services could offer antibiotics, for example, but not rectify the dental issues.

Unable to register with an NHS dentist

The most common queries we receive are from people struggling to find a dentist that they can register with or will offer them treatment. More are commenting that NHS dentists they approach will only take private patients and the ones which will add them to their waiting lists are often over 20 miles away (some commented the nearest they could find were in Buxton and Stafford).

- *"We relocated to the area last September and simply cannot find anyone that is willing to accept my 11-year-old as an NHS patient. They are all willing to accept her as a private patient, therefore incur costs."*

- *"We moved to Nantwich last year and have not been able to find an NHS dentist as none are accepting patients. I've contacted my MP in January who has not helped us, so we just live with regular toothache and sensitivity."*
- *"I have been searching for an NHS dentist now for 4 years and cannot even get on a waiting list."*

> *"I have been searching for an NHS dentist for months and cannot get to see one. I have severe problems with my teeth and gums and it's affecting my ability to eat."*

- *"I moved into the area 4 years ago and have been trying to register with a dentist as an NHS Patient since that time.*
- *Today I contacted the NHS Dental help line on 0300 311 22 33 who gave me two practices about 8 miles away. Both of them said they were not taking NHS patients."*
- *"I need a filling and I have been on the NHS waiting list for over 3 years. I can't put it off any longer and hoping I can get some help finding some treatment on the NHS. Part of my tooth is black and it is now starting to hurt."*

> *"We have just moved into the area. After ringing 8 dentists and consulting the NHS website and reviewing 35 dental practices there are NO dentists accepting NHS patients."*

Unable to access treatment without going to private providers

A number of people said they had resorted to accessing private dentists as they felt they couldn't wait any longer. Many said they were unable to afford to and it had caused financial stress following unexpectedly high bills.

- *"My daughter is a Paediatric Student Nurse and is unable to register with an NHS Dentist across Cheshire. This resulted in needing to borrow hundreds of pounds or getting a credit card to pay for 3 fillings!"*
- *"No NHS appointments, I waited for 6 months and then I went to a private dentist and paid £450."*

Recently more people who need a course of treatment are finding themselves with large bills from having to access private care due to funding issues, even if they are registered with an NHS dentist. Those who are unable to pay such fees often end up living with discomfort and accessing emergency treatment, losing teeth that could have potentially been saved.

Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A woman rang asking for advice as her dentist was refusing to carry out root canal treatment unless she paid for private treatment. She had three teeth which had previously had root canal therapy but they were now failing and she was unable to afford the £800 + needed for private treatment. She felt her dentist should be offering this treatment on the NHS.

A man rang asking for help to find an NHS dentist. He had tried NHS 111 and had accessed an emergency dentist via the helpline who had told him he needed root canal treatment not available via the emergency service. He phoned over 60 dentists and was unable to find any NHS treatment. He cannot afford private care and is concerned he has an infection. He is fearful he may lose his job due to not feeling well enough to work and time taken out to find treatment.

A woman had a check-up recently as a private patient as she could not get in to see an NHS dentist. She needs extensive work doing which she cannot afford to have done privately. She is looking for an NHS dentist but has not been able to find one. She has rung around but no one will take her on as an NHS patient.

Difficulty getting an appointment with their registered dentist

A number of people said they found it difficult to get an appointment with the dentist they were already registered to. Some have a backlog of patients to see for regular check-ups following COVID restrictions during the past two years.

- *"No appointment available even for regular check-ups."*
- *"I had severe toothache for two weeks and called my dentist every day for 5 days to get an appointment. The appointment I was offered was 5 weeks away. I went to a private dentist and paid around £600."*

Telephone call taken by Healthwatch

A 56-year-old man, said he was suffering from toothache and contacted his dentist to get an appointment. He was informed the earliest appointment would be 4 months away, so he made the decision to see a private dentist.

Being deregistered as deemed inactive

Some people had been told they were no longer registered with their dentist, despite having treatment with them for years previously. Some had not been to the dentist during the 2-year COVID period, and, despite having no communication from the practice, were told they were no longer registered when they called to make an appointment.

- *"I had a routine check-up prior to lock down. I tried to make a routine appointment when restrictions permitted, and was told that I'd been removed from the practice list, without warning."*
- *"I've been taken off the list at my local practice. I hadn't had a reminder for my 6-month check-up so didn't attend a booked appointment. The next time I went I was told I'd been taken off the list so I've had to go private."*

Accessing care and treatment from emergency dentist

Healthwatch regularly sign post to the Emergency Care Dental Helpline when people cannot find treatment at a local NHS dentist. We have received comments that patients sometimes struggle to get an emergency appointment and when they do, the treatment is basic and they are left without any follow up care.

- *"For a year I have been unable to access an NHS dentist anywhere in Cheshire. Even after contacting the Emergency Care Dental Helpline, I was unable to get treatment due to NHS dental providers not offering root canal treatment because 'the funding is just not there'."*
- *"My husband has a broken cap that is very painful. He has been suffering for 12 months, he can't get an emergency dental appointment. We have tried emergency lines and 111."*

"I need a root canal doing. I've been seen by the Emergency Care Dental Helpline four times and charged each time for an anaesthetic and emergency filling. I have rung all the dentists in Cheshire East and no one will do the work. I'm in pain and feel that no one is helping."

Additional findings

Poor treatment

Healthwatch received a number of comments from people who felt they had received poor treatment from their dentist and the practice had not dealt with their situation effectively.

- *"In August I went for a check-up. My dentist said I had a slight weak point in my tooth and that I would need a filling. However, the filling went wrong. Six appointments later I ended up needing a full root canal which then became infected. They tried to fix the mistake, but it kept going wrong and they never apologised or admitted a mistake."*

Positive comments

A number of people were very happy with the treatment and service they received from their NHS dentists. These were patients who had maintained regular check-ups and had been with their dental practice a number of years so seemed to be unaffected by the trends noted above.

- *"I go to a local dentist which is handy and close to home, and I have always found them really good and I'm able to get an appointment."*
- *"Straight forward to get appointment, all staff are professional, high quality of care."*
- *"I've heard about people finding it hard to see a dentist and am glad I have mine. I have regular check-ups and have been told they will carry on with me as an NHS patient."*
- *"Provided an emergency appointment within 24hrs, good dental care."*

Comments were also made about the service resuming post COVID and how the practices they were registered with had adapted well to the transition.

- *"I am now accessing check-ups and appointments the same as before the COVID pandemic without any problems. It is good to see dental services returning to normal."*
- *"Been working well despite COVID, full treatment in place. Restarted service as soon as they could once lockdown permitted."*

- *"Excellent service maintained for emergencies and non-routine appointments during the pandemic. I had one emergency and two routine dental appointments in the last two years. Very good communication throughout."*

Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants

Healthwatch have recently been working with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in the Cheshire area, helping to explain how the health service works in the UK and signposting to relevant local services. It became apparent that there were no NHS dentists in the surrounding areas which they were able to register with. Even if places were available, practices are often unable to register them as they do not have a permanent address.

We encountered many people with dental problems, women with broken teeth and others who were eager to maintain the health of their teeth but were unable to do so upon arrival to the UK. One commented the dental service was better in their country of origin.

In emergency situations, appointments are offered outside the local area which they would find very difficult to travel to without the necessary funds or public transport.

Access to accurate information

Healthwatch regularly use and refer people to the NHS website during engagement events and via telephone and email. There have been a number of occasions when people have commented the information is out of date. The practice has stated they are taking new patients and when the person has called this is no longer the case.

When browsing the site practice information was often last updated months previously and in one case in 2018. It is currently difficult for people to find which practice is taking on new patients without calling each one individually.

Next steps

Healthwatch Cheshire are continuing to monitor queries regarding dentistry and encourage anybody with issues accessing a dentist to share their experience with us on our online Feedback Centre:

https://healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk/
https://healthwatchcwac.org.uk/

Our findings and reports are fed into Healthwatch England to help build up a national picture of the situation.

We share all comments and feedback with individual dental providers locally, and also NHS England who commission dentistry services. We will continue to work together using regular meetings and contact to raise concerns and provide feedback.

Further information

We advise callers that if they are experiencing bleeding, swelling or pain to their mouth they should call NHS 111 for triage, or call the Emergency Dental Helpline on 0161 476 9651.

If you have any queries regarding this report or would like to talk to us regarding support, please contact:

Email: info@healthwatchcheshire.org.uk
Telephone: 0300 323 0006