Access to NHS Dental services in Halton

Update report – December 2022

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Access to NHS Dentistry in Halton - update

Finding an NHS dentist, or any dentist, taking on patients in Halton has been the most common signposting enquiry we've received in the past year. Many of the enquiries have specifically been about trying to get NHS dental appointments for children.

From the calls we've been receiving, the issue of access to NHS dental treatment seems to be getting worse, not better, and people contacting us are more desperate than ever.

For most of this year there have been no dentists in Halton (or elsewhere in Merseyside and Cheshire) taking on new adult NHS patients, and very few accepting new child patients. At the time of this report, December 2022, there are no dentists in Halton accepting NHS patients, adult or child according to information on the NHS website, https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist/.

The only option for people, who are not registered with an NHS dentist already, is to sign up with a dental practice as a private patient. This option is not affordable for most people locally, even before the current cost-of-living crisis.

Dental health inequalities

Results of the 2021 **Adult Oral Health Survey**, published by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, on 21 December 2022, echo the feedback collected by local Healthwatch.

More than 6,300 people in England responded to the Adult Oral Health Survey. Results show:

- 35% of adults needed dental treatment or advice between March 2020 and March 2021
- The most common problems were broken or decayed tooth (36%) or toothache or mouth pain (31%)
- More people in deprived neighbourhoods had pain (41%) or broken or decayed teeth (36-40%) compared with those in the least deprived neighbourhoods (24-25% and 30% respectively)
- 68% of people who needed help contacted their usual dental practice
- 16% didn't try contacting any service and of these, most didn't because of shielding or being worried about Covid (23%) or they couldn't afford to pay dental charges (13%)
- 26% of those who couldn't afford to pay dental charges, lived in the most deprived neighbourhoods (compared with 3% in least deprived) and 34% lived in lowest-income households (compared to 5% in highest-income homes)
- 34% of people who couldn't afford to pay described their dental health as bad, compared to 5% of people who couldn't pay and said their dental health was good
- 10% said they didn't receive any advice or treatment after seeking help.

Dental facts and figures

- Just over a third of Halton adults (37.5%)[1] saw an NHS dentist in the past 2 years. This is lower than elsewhere in the country and lower than every area in Cheshire & Merseyside other than Liverpool.

- Less than half of Halton children (42.2%)[2] saw an NHS dentist last year. This is lower than every other area in Cheshire and Merseyside.

- Halton has a lower number of dentists per 100,000 population than any other part of Cheshire and Merseyside.

- Patients have a right to register with a GP if they live in their catchment area however busy they may be. This isn't the case for dentists. Dentists don't have to accept new patients and can close their books to new NHS patients when they are busy.

- Patients who are already on a dental practice list will be able to get treatment and even check-ups. Those not lucky enough to be on a list will not get a dentist even if they have major pain or decay.

- Because of low incomes many local people would be eligible for free NHS dental care if it was available. Even those who do need to pay for NHS dental care face costs many times higher if they go private.

- There are major problems with the NHS dental contract, which doesn't work well for patients or dentists. National action is needed to fix the dental contract and make sure there is enough NHS dentistry to meet patient needs.

- Currently NHS England commission dentistry. From April 2023 this responsibility moves to Integrated Care Systems, new NHS bodies. It is important that the Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care System is ready for this new responsibility.

- There is an Emergency Dental Service which sees people in urgent need and great pain for one-off care such as antibiotics or a temporary filling. However, people are then stuck without a dentist to fix their actual dental problem. This does little to reduce need.

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[1] NHS dental statistics for England Dashboard - https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiYTRlMzJiYTEtMTgwMi00ZTdiLTgzMWUtZGM5Y2NmMTI5MGE4IiwidCI6IjUwZjYwNzFmLWJiZmUtNDAxYS04ODAzLTY3Mzc0OGU2MjllMiIsImMiOjh9
[2] NHS dental statistics for England Dashboard - https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiYTRlMzJiYTEtMTgwMi00ZTdiLTgzMWUtZGM5Y2NmMTI5MGE4IiwidCI6IjUwZjYwNzFmLWJiZmUtNDAxYS04ODAzLTY3Mzc0OGU2MjllMiIsImMiOjh9

What we're hearing

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of calls we received regarding dental care were from people just looking for a dentist for check-ups.

Now the majority of our dental enquiries are from people who have an urgent dental problem and have been dealing with pain for some time. People are increasingly desperate about the state of their teeth. Many have already been seen by the Cheshire & Merseyside Emergency Dental Service, which provides one-off care for people with urgent needs, and have then been told to find a dentist for their ongoing care.

> *'I was taken off my local dentist's client list as I had not been during Covid. I had tried to get a check-up that was due but was told no appointments were available as I was not an emergency and dentist did not have the latest masks required. When a piece of tooth broke away, I was told by my dentist to contact the NHS emergency appointment clinic in Stockport for help. I went through a lengthy question session with receptionist and was told that as I was not in pain, I did not qualify for an emergency appointment. After 9 months of trying once each month, my dentist accepted me back and I had the tooth removed. This was just in time as the tooth was becoming painful.'*

Dental pain is not a minor issue. Imagine having toothache and living with that for months or even years before you can get it treated, while the problem gets worse.

> *'I resorted to pulling my own wisdom tooth out, it broke off and now causes pain up the side of my face every day.'*
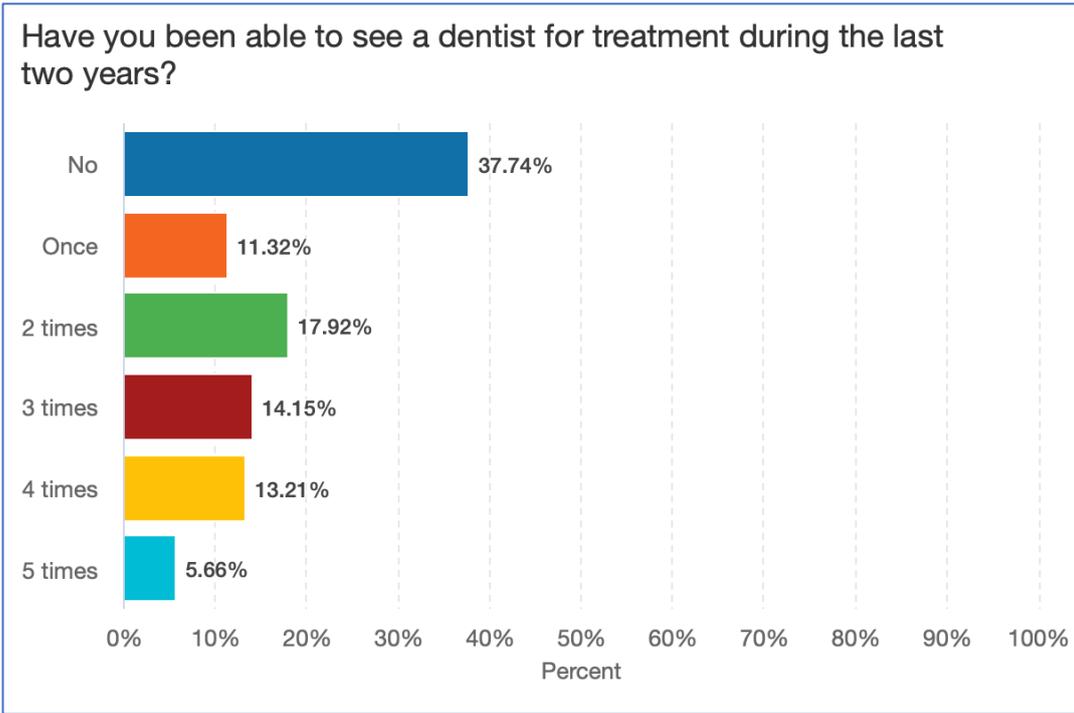
Dental update survey results

In March 2022 we published a report, **'The Big Dental Check-Up'**[3] based on 176 responses to an online survey we ran during October and November 2021.

Since the publication of the report, access to NHS dentistry treatment locally hasn't noticeably improved and we continued to receive a steady number of enquiries from people desperate to find an NHS dentist that would treat them.
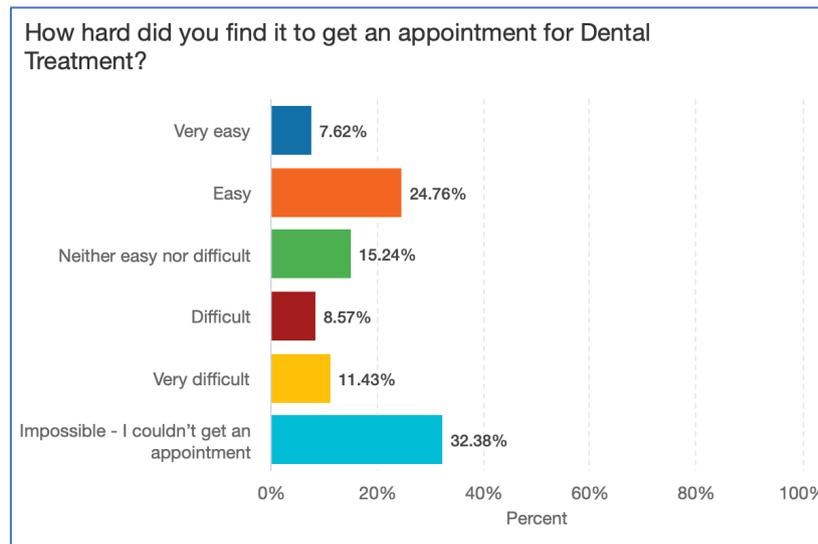
In September we launched an online survey to gather more information on people's experiences of accessing or trying to access NHS Dental Treatment. The survey ran from 26 September 2022 to 26 October 2022 and 106 people completed the survey.

We asked if people had visited a dentist in the previous two years. 66 people told us they had been at least once, while 40 people said they hadn't been able to see a dentist.

Have you been able to see a dentist for treatment during the last two years?

	Percent
No	37.74%
Once	11.32%
2 times	17.92%
3 times	14.15%
4 times	13.21%
5 times	5.66%

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[3] https://www.healthwatchhalton.co.uk/report/2022-05-30/big-dental-check

How hard did you find it to get an appointment?

One in three people told us it was it 'Very easy' or 'Easy' to get a dental appointment.

Of those people who manged to get an appointment, 40% said they were 'Easy' or 'Very easy' to book at a date and time they preferred.

One patient said, *'My NHS dentist has seen me during Covid and has continued to see me at six-month intervals. I've not experienced any problems with an appointment in the past two years.'* Another told us, *'I'm back to normal 6 monthly check-ups at my NHS dentist. I've had teeth out & also new dentures.'*

Some dental practices contacted patients once the pandemic restrictions were lifted, *'My dentist called me for a check-up after covid restrictions lifted, I have had 6 monthly check-ups ever since.'*

Another patient told us they found it easy to get an appointment as, *'I have gone private since my dentist left the NHS system.'*

One in five people told us they had found some difficulty in getting an appointment.

Some contacted dental practices over many months before managing to receive treatment.

- 🦷 *'Spent months in pain trying to get a dentist being passed around to finally after 6 months having some luck.'*

- 🦷 *'They wouldn't see me until my tooth became an emergency, it could have been prevented, instead I had an attempted extraction at the dentist then sent to dental hospital, my mouth was butchered I then needed stitches, all of which could of been prevented with treatment earlier.'*

Some people were told they were no longer registered with their dental practice,

- *'I tried to get an appointment as soon as dentists reopened after lockdown, to no avail. The dentist me, my husband and children have had since the 80's binned us. They said, you've not been in 2 years, I explained we couldn't go or ring as all dentists were closed during lockdown. They said it doesn't matter. That's the rules if you ain't been in two years, your registration has lapsed. You'll need to re-register. I said OK can I register us? No, they said, we're full, not taking in new patients and there is no waiting list to put your name on!'*

- *'It would be good if they could send out reminders for check-ups etc rather than just leaving it then striking you off without warning.'*

- *'There's no chance of me getting an appointment at the dentist I've seen for years as I didn't ring up to book after Covid and have been kicked off their list.'*

Some people resorted to looking for dentists further afield as they were unable to get treatment locally.

- *'Had to go out of town for private treatment, couldn't get in locally for private never mind NHS.'*

- *'I moved from Lancashire in Dec 2020 to Runcorn. I have rung several dentist practices but have not found any who will take on NHS patients. I moved to be closer to my daughters as I am registered disabled. I have to travel a 100-mile round trip to visit my old dentist in Lancashire which means taking someone with me to help with driving. One hour there, 10 mins at the dentist and one hour back to Runcorn. It makes no sense at all.'*

- *'One time when I was in excruciating pain my husband drove me round trying to find a dentist who would see me. Eventually I saw one who gave me antibiotics but was unable to give me an appointment.'*

- *'It's ridiculous - last time I needed treatment I travelled to West Kirby for help as that was where my old dentist was based. A 60-mile round trip!!'*

One in three people told us it had been impossible to get an NHS appointment.

> 🦷 *'When I contacted my NHS dentist after the pandemic, I was refused an appointment on the basis that I had not attended in the last 2 years and was removed from their list. I tried to argue that this was unfair as I had not attended due to the pandemic, but they refused to discuss the matter. I have had to go private since.'*

> 🦷 *'I have recently lost a filling from my teeth and need to see a dentist. I have contacted NHS111, emergency out of hours and tried local dentists but none are taking NHS patients.'*

> 🦷 *'Appalling situation. Not only are no dentists taking on new patients, family & friends registered with a dentist state the level of care and the quality of dental work is really bad. Also, teeth are being removed instead of saving them because its quicker/cheaper.'*

Only private patients

We heard comments from patients who had been offered appointments as private patients rather than NHS patients.

> 🦷 *'My regular NHSs dentist took me off their list. Said I had missed appointments but I hadn't, couldn't get another dentist to take me on so had to go private it cost me over £250.'*

> 🦷 *When I contacted my NHS dentist after the pandemic I was refused an appointment on the basis that I had not attended in the last 2 years and was removed from their list. I tried to argue that this was unfair as I had not attended due to the pandemic but they refused to discuss the matter. I have had to go private since.'*

Self-treatment

Some people commented that they had resorted to treating themselves as they couldn't get to see a dentist..

> 🦷 *'I resorted to pulling my own wisdom tooth out, it broke off and now causes pain up the side of my face every day.'*

> 🦷 *'Impossible to see anyone. Had to use amazon to buy fillings.'*

Dental Treatment

How satisfied were you with how much your dental treatment cost?

Neutral - 30.88%

Dissatisfied - 20.59%

Satisfied - 26.47%

Very dissatisfied - 13.24%

Very satisfied - 8.82%

Customer Satisfaction Score: 49.26

● Very dissatisfied   ● Dissatisfied   ● Neutral   ● Satisfied   ● Very satisfied

We asked people how satisfied they were with the cost of their treatment. There was a fairly even split in satisfaction, with 35% of patients being satisfied with the cost, 34% being dissatisfied and 31% held a neutral view on the costs.

Incomes in Halton are below the national average, and with the current cost-of-living crisis many people have little chance of affording private dentistry, which is often all they are offered.

When asked if the cost of treatment put people off seeing the dentist as often as recommended, 40% said it did.

🦷 *'I always attend appointments given me and do not consider costs an issue. However, it is sometimes a little annoying when everyone states that NHS is completely free!'*

🦷 *I've had a broken tooth for 18 months due to cost and lack on dental appointments I can't even get appointments for my 3 sons.'*

🦷 *'Last year paid £180 for one tooth replacement.'*

🦷 *'My dentist has become a sales man. Every time I see him, he tries to get me to spend, either for extra treatment or a new electric toothbrush etc.'*

🦷 *'I have just had to sign up for Denplan as I was concerned about the future. I couldn't get in on the NHS but was offered a place as a Denplan patient.'*

Impossible to see an nhs dentist, my last one crossed me of their list said I'd missed appointments, I know I hadn't. I needed treatment as I couldn't get an nhs one I had to go private, this cost me quite a bit of money but at the end of the day it was worth it as things would have go worse.

'Pain stopped but I now have a huge gap because I can't afford the cost of any more treatment.'

Any other comments

We received a number of general comments on dental services locally and nationally covering some of the themes below:

Lack of NHS dentists

Many people called for more NHS dental capacity in Halton.

'Not enough NHS dentists. I would like to change mine but there is no availability'

'They are non-existent as far as I am concerned. Unless you want to go private, which I cannot afford.'

'Really need more NHS places and for dentists to be streamlined like doctor would be great if a dentist was attached to doctors so you went the same place.'

'The loss of dentists is seriously affecting when patients can be seen. Sadly, my dentist left the practice after the first lockdown and my wonderful brilliant new dentist is leaving soon to open his own private practice. This will be a huge loss to everyone as no new dentists are wanting to treat NHS patients.'

'There is no NHS dental service in Widnes, therefore I cannot comment on it.'

Children

Some comments focussed on difficulties accessing dental treatment for children.

- *'It's absolutely disgraceful that my children have to forfeit adequate dental care in such a way. Yet if their teeth suffer it's classed as a sign of parental neglect to authorities. That's not fair.'*

- I've had to contact the Liverpool dental hospital to get a new palette as I can't get in anywhere at all with myself or my 3 kids.

Emergency Treatment

- *'I last saw a dentist about 10 years ago and my teeth are now in urgent need of attention. I was also in a car crash last week and more of my teeth have now broke and cracked. I have tried to get into local dentists but none are taking on NHS patients, I have also tried the emergency dental number and they never have any appointments. I am in agony with my teeth and also get abscesses.'*

Earlier Access

Some patients believed their teeth could have been saved rather than removed if they had received treatment sooner.

- *'Tooth had to be removed. Cannot be sure if it could have been saved if dentist had seen me earlier.'*

- *'My tooth could have been saved.'*

- *'I was booked in for a check-up. Once I arrived, I told the dentist that I had a sharp piece of tooth. The dentist rectified this issue but that was all. I don't feel that I had a thorough check up.'*

Positive experiences

For patients who had been able to get appointments there were positive experiences.

Just over 70% said they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the dental treatment received.

How satisfied were you with the dental treatment you received?

Satisfied - 36.76%
Neutral - 14.71%
Dissatisfied - 8.82%
Very dissatisfied - 5.88%
Very satisfied - 33.82%

Customer Satisfaction Score: 70.96

● Very dissatisfied ● Dissatisfied ● Neutral ● Satisfied ● Very satisfied

🦷 *'Back to normal 6 monthly check-ups at my NHS dentist. I've had teeth out & also new dentures.'*

🦷 *'My dentist called me for a check-up after covid restrictions lifted have had 6 monthly check-ups ever since.'*

🦷 *'I had a reaction to the anaesthetic, and they made sure I was looked after and even called me over the following weeks to check I was okay.'*

🦷 *'The surgery was busy, but all the reception staff were seeing everyone as they came in. We saw a dentist we hadn't seen before. He was very friendly and chatty. A full check-up was done, including x-rays and fluoride paste. I was able to book her in for another check-up in six months' time.'*

🦷 *'I have a fabulous service from Weston Dental Centre, Runcorn. Great customer care from the responsive professional and friendly reception on the phone and on arrival. Reminders sent regarding appointments. Safe environment with clear instruction on safe passage through building. Masks made available. Professional, friendly, prompt, customer focused service from the Dentist. Clear billing information. Feel confident and assured in the service provided which couldn't be better.'*

What needs to happen next?

There needs to be a national discussion between patients, dental leaders, the NHS and politicians about how the NHS is going to meet the country's dental health needs.

Healthwatch England is calling for the following:

- **A more rapid and radical reform of the way dentistry is commissioned and provided** – recognising that the current arrangements do not meet the needs of many people who cannot access NHS dental care in a timely way and acknowledge issues faced by the dental profession.
- **Using the reform of commissioning to tackle the twin crises of access and affordability** – ensuring that people are not excluded from dental services because of lack of provision locally or difficultly in meeting charges. Currently, there are significant inequalities that must be removed. New arrangements should be based on maximising access to NHS dental services, with particular emphasis on reducing inequalities.
- **Greater clarity in the information about NHS dentistry** – improving information, including online, so that people have a clear picture of where and how they can access services, and the charges they will need to pay. Particularly, the reform must address dentistry 'registration' which causes significant confusion for both services and patients.
- **Look at using dental practices to support people's general health** – harnessing opportunities, such as the development of Primary Care Networks, to link oral health to other key issues such as weight management and smoking cessation.

Locally, Healthwatch Halton would like to see:

- **Clear and honest communication between the NHS and the public about the scale of the dental challenge**, how long it is likely to be before patients can get dentists and the action that is being taken.
- **An action plan to stabilise and then restore NHS provision locally** including fair access to the existing provision during the recovery period to minimise harm and inequality.

  - Ensuring people have a fair and equal chance to get an NHS dental appointment rather than just those lucky enough to have had a dentist when the pandemic hit.
  - Consideration of whether the length of time between check-ups might need to be temporarily extended to help get more people the chance of an NHS check-up during this recovery period.
  - Targeted action to improve access to dental care in Halton to at least the National average
  - Action to encourage recruitment and retention of NHS dentists locally.

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