



# **Access to NHS Dentistry and Health and Wellbeing**

**Report: March 2023**

**healthwatch**  
Bolton

# Contents

<b>Background &amp; Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Demographics &amp; Methodology.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What people told us.....</b>	<b>4-9</b>
<b>Summary &amp; Recommendations.....</b>	<b>9-10</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Commissioner Responses .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Background and Introduction

We have been aware for a number of years and certainly since the beginning of Healthwatch in 2013, that access to NHS dentistry in Bolton has been somewhat problematic. Some people have struggled to access an NHS dentist in Bolton, sometimes dental practices close their lists to any new patients and this then impacts on patients. We know that NHS dentistry has been under increasing pressure with the dental contract not being adequate to ensure the population can access timely and appropriate NHS dentistry. This not only frustrates patients, but dentists too, who find they are struggling to keep their practices viable, often resorting to only offering private appointments.

When the Covid 19 pandemic struck in 2020, like a lot of services, practices were not able to see patients for any routine check-ups. The pandemic has had a hugely negative impact on dentistry with some patients finding they have been removed from practice lists (even though there is no actual requirement to register). Over the past three years Healthwatch Bolton has taken 406 enquiries from the public, about access to an NHS dentist. It has become almost impossible for people to access NHS dentistry in Bolton and we know the national picture is very similar. We have done many pieces of work on this issue and we have submitted joint reports from our colleagues in Greater Manchester Healthwatch. Healthwatch England has also been working hard to raise issues at Government level and they, like us, have submitted evidence to the Health and Social Care Select Committee.

It is however, disappointing that we see very little improvement to the situation, despite there being more money put into NHS dentistry, we do not see this equating to improved access to NHS dentistry. We also know that many millions of pounds have been clawed back from dentistry funding and we are not entirely sure why this is, considering the level of need in England alone.

We decided to undertake this further piece of work, because for one we do not see any improvement to access to NHS dentistry, but we also want to magnify the wider impact on people's health. This report highlights how some people's physical and mental health is being affected by not being able to access NHS dentistry.

# Summary of Findings

## Demographics

- ✚ 150 people responded to the survey. People responded from all the postcode areas of Bolton. 46% of people were aged 25-49, 30% of people were aged 50-64, 15% of people were aged 65-79, 6% of people were aged 80+ and 2% of people were aged 18-24.
- ✚ 82% of people who responded were White British, 3% were Asian British Pakistani, 6% were Asian British Indian, 6% were Black African & White, 2% were Asian & White, 1% was Asian British Bangladeshi.
- ✚ 72% of respondents identified as women and 27% identified as men, 1% identified as non-binary

## Methodology

We produced a simple survey. The survey ran from November 2022 to the end of February 2023. The survey was shared with groups in paper format to enable people to participate in the survey who did not have access to digital means. We also encouraged people to take part by telephone if they wished to.

The survey was promoted on our social media channels, our newsletter, our website and via community engagement sessions. Healthwatch Bolton engagement officers attended various events and meetings in the community to ensure a broad range of voices were included in the feedback. Face to face took place with the following:

Bolton Prostate Cancer Group

Bolton Information Partnership

Caribbean/African Health Network

Bolton Over 50s Group

Zakiria Mosque Sisters group

Kildonan House Health Mela

Talk Changes

Changing Life Directions

Bolton Community College and ESOL department

Fleethouse Hostel

GP Federation / Social Prescribers / Bolton Council

Bolton Library/ Lets keep Bolton Moving

## What People Told Us

### Q1. Do you currently have access to a dentist in Bolton?

30% of people said **Yes - NHS**

16% of people said **Yes – Private**

52% of people said **No access to either NHS or Private**

2% of people said they **weren't sure**

### Q2. If you do not have access to a dentist, can you tell us who needs access? For example, this could be: children, someone living with a health and care need, a carer etc.

People responded to say they themselves needed access with some saying family members too. Some respondents also specifically mentioned their children who also did not have access to and NHS dentist.

### Q3. Have you had difficulty with any of the following?

45% of people said **they had difficulty getting a routine appointment.**

28% of people said **they had difficulty getting an urgent appointment**

45% of people said **they had difficulty getting the treatment they needed**

30% of people said **they had no difficulties**

#### Comments:

*"Difficult to get any dental care"*

*"Getting an NHS dentist"*

*"Cannot afford private prices"*

*"Affording the cost of treatment, am waiting for two fillings but can't afford them"*

#### **Q4. Self-Care – have you done any of the following to alleviate any dental issues you have such as dental pain?**

**74%** of people said they had used **painkillers**

**81%** of people said they looked after their teeth by **regular brushing/flossing etc**

**19%** of people said they had used **temporary dental repair packs**

#### **Comments:**

*“Self-bought antibiotics for £45”*

*“Pulled out teeth myself”*

*“Extracted many teeth myself”*

*“Attempted meditation to block out pain/discomfort”*

#### **Q.5 do you know about the urgent dental care service?**

**57%** of people said **Yes**

**34%** of people said **No**

**9%** of people were **not sure**

#### **Q.6 If you have not been able to access dental care (NHS or private), has this impacted on your physical and/or mental health. Please tell us:**

**15%** of people said **Yes it had impacted on their physical health**

**25%** of people said **Yes it had impacted on their mental health**

**45%** of people said **Yes it had impacted on both their physical and mental health**

**37%** of people reported **no impact**

#### **Comments:**

*“I am struggling with infections constantly, I need all my teeth removed and dentures”*

*"It is causing concern which heightened my anxiety level"*

*"Having both mental and physical problems, my filling came out and I can't eat properly, this is causing me a lot of stress"*

*"Causing toothache and sharpness from broken tooth"*

*"My long term mental and physical health condition has an impact on the calcium and vitamin D levels in my body, I need dental treatment and cannot access it. My older child has a learning disability and has teeth affected by poor oral hygiene and long term antibiotics as a baby. Toddler, they also can't get dental care or treatment as unable to register"*

*"The children need braces and were promised a referral before they were refused a follow up appointment. Their mental health is suffering as they worry they will never see the orthodontist and will have to live with protruding/uneven teeth forever"*

*"My teeth are ugly and crumbling and I never smile or stand close to anyone"*

*"Depressed about the state of my teeth"*

*"My teeth are literally crumbling away, it is extremely painful"*

*"Have to take so many painkillers I am sometimes left with upset stomach and pain"*

*"I have toothache and jaw pain that is constant and affects my daily life. It is not severe enough to see the emergency dentist as I have no swelling. Sometimes I worry because I get a stabbing pain in the affected tooth and lose a lot of blood, almost like a small haemorrhage. I have a genetic condition that causes uncontrollable bleeding and this is a red flag for me.*

*I've also read that tooth decay is a cause of heart problems and I'm worried about the effects of leaving this bad tooth. My jaw is dislocated while I'm eating and I'm also under ENT for swallowing difficulties.. Only being able to chew on one side is massively affecting my ability to swallow safely."*

*"I worry that my teeth will deteriorate further if I am unable to secure the services of an NHS dentist"*

*"Living on a knife-edge, so worried"*

*"Impacted wisdom teeth but couldn't get help to be referred so the pain has been intense and can't cope day to day"*

*"I'm a woman and have only 6 top teeth left, the rest are loose and sore. Husband's have started to snap off"*

*"I know that I need treatment and my back wisdom tooth is loose and painful. Makes my depression worse because can't afford private"*

*"Depression and anxiety"*

*"Depressed about the state of my teeth"*

*"Really self-conscious about my teeth and not to mention the pain of it keep recurring"*

*"Spent days and days in pain, had to scrape to afford private, can't afford to do it again. Have been on waiting lists at several dentists for 3 years"*

*"I have physical disabilities and mental health illness"*

#### **Q.7 Have you seen/spoken to any other health or care professional about your dental issues and how it is impacting on your physical/mental health?**

Most people who responded had not spoken to anyone else about their dental issues. However some had spoken to their GP, social worker or midwife

#### **Q.8 If you have struggled to access a dentist, is there anything else you would like to tell us?**

##### **Comments:**

*"We need Bolton to accept NHS patients especially patients who are vulnerable and have children. We have been waiting a long time and still no practice are taking NHS patients"*

*"You need to ensure that there are dentists in Bolton who take on NHS patients"*

*"It's horrible, my eldest child has not been to a dentist in years as we got booted off the list as we didn't attend for a few years due to Covid. Trying to find a dentist, I could not get one whilst pregnant and still cannot find one for my eldest child. I was seen by the emergency dentist shortly after giving birth as I had abscess and needed to have teeth removed. No follow up to have restorative treatment even though the dentist I saw said the surgery would help me".*



*"As a wheelchair user I find most practices hard to get into. This is why I'm very upset that my dentist deregistered me while they were closed due to Covid, as I could get inside their building at least. Also I have anaesthetic resistance and bleeding problems which complicate things and it's better to be seen regularly by the same dentist. I was getting prescription strength toothpaste to protect my soft gums and enamel which I now cannot access.*

*I feel so utterly helpless. I've rang around every dentist within 50 miles and none will take me on. Why is the Government not intervening? I can't afford to go private. Most insurance companies will not insure me due to my genetic illness and me needing extra care. I have no hope of ever seeing a dentist again. If I lost my teeth I would never go outside. I'd rather live in solitude forever or perhaps even not want to be alive! In today's society, if you have bad teeth you're lazy and unhygienic, and people don't see the underlying reasons for the problems"*

*"How do children access an NHS orthodontist without seeing a dentist first? The NHS site is always out of date by the time you call. I spent 3 hours calling dentists, some just put the phone down when I mentioned NHS".*

*"Tried the NHS service – the nearest dentist taking patients was 7 buses away and 3 hours each way"*

*"Since not being able to join an appointment for two years over Covid, I have had every routine appointment cancelled for the last year, by text, usually the day before the appointment. Each time it takes many, many phone calls to rebook and at times I've had to go in person to speak to anybody. When the appointment is finally booked (usually months away), it is always cancelled again a day or two before the appointment is due. I have managed to get one appointment for myself after making a complaint and threatening to report the practice, but my 11 year old daughter hasn't had a dental appointment since she was 8 because her appointments continue to be cancelled over and over again".*

*"I have been trying for over 5 years"*

*"We have not had a dentist for years and the NHS needs to be brought back for struggling families"*

*"Private dentists have appointments, but I'm entitled to free dental treatment"*

*"No service available for people with disabilities"*

*"My teeth are in a poor state and sometimes cause discomfort whilst eating. One practitioner said to me 'if you consider teeth being the furniture of the mouth, it looks as though you have had the bailiffs in and they weren't careful at doing their work'*

*"Husband struggles as he is an amputee and is in a large wheelchair. I reached out to NHS England and was only offered he emergency number which wasn't classed as an emergency at the time"*

*"I'm not sure I could even afford to see an NHS dentist, one of my friends travels almost 80 miles to see one"*

*"Unable to access NHS dentist but had to go private as essential assessed by a dentist prior to cancer treatment. This impacts on finances as no longer able to work due to health condition"*

*"It is Impossible to get an NHS dentist, I have been trying for 3 years"*

## **Summary of Findings**

It is clear from the feedback and comments in this survey, and the people that contact us for help, that many people are struggling to access NHS dentistry for both adults and children. Affordable NHS dentistry should be available and accessible to all that need it. Lack of access to NHS or adequate and affordable dentistry is impacting on people's lives, both physically and mentally. If this issue is not addressed urgently then people could have more serious problems the longer the situation continues.

Some people are living with serious and complicated health issues. Not being able to access NHS dentistry is possibly causing existing health issues to worsen or create new ones. People are struggling with anxiety and depression, people are living with tooth pain and other dental issues which is impacting them greatly. The cost of living is making paying for private dentistry virtually impossible for many people.

Some people report that their children are unable to access NHS dentistry and orthodontic treatments. Children are therefore in danger of having serious and more complicated dental issues as they get older. Children are also suffering mentally if they are finding they cannot access orthodontic treatment.

People with disabilities are finding they are being left without access to NHS dentistry and losing hope of ever seeing a dentist again.

## Recommendations

1. Ensure that there are sufficient resources to allow people needing access to NHS dentistry can get the treatment they desperately need. Many people do not meet the criteria to access urgent dental care and are therefore left with nowhere to turn, and their dental issues needlessly becoming 'urgent'.
2. Understand the wider impact on people's physical and mental health, of not having regular access to NHS dentistry.
3. Health professionals also need to be making their voice heard in the case to improve access to NHS dentistry.
4. If people are offered urgent care, when appropriate, ensure patients are referred to Greater Manchester Access Plus Scheme\* for the necessary follow-up treatment. This will prevent the patient from needing access to urgent dental care in the immediate future.
5. Ensure that anyone with a maternity exemption certificate can access an NHS dentist
6. Understand and act on the need for children and young people to have access to adequate NHS dentistry. Prevention should be the key element so that children and young people are not storing up issues for the future.
7. Improve education and availability of free resources to help people understand the importance of looking after their teeth. This should be extended to care homes so that older people can maintain good oral health eg. people living with dementia.
8. Ensure that the NHS England website is kept up to date so that people can see if there are any NHS dentists offering vacancies.
9. It is paramount that dental practices make provision for people with disabilities to access treatment.
10. Ensure that there is up to date information available for people to find out where they can access an NHS dentist and importantly - what they should do if they are unable to do this. There should also be readily available information regarding prevention and how to look after oral health.

*\*Greater Manchester Access Plus Scheme improves access and delivers continuation of care to patients who have received urgent care but who require further care and treatment within an NHS Dental practice. Following initial treatment at the UDC the patient is referred to a participating practice who will provide a complete course of treatment.*

Accessing Dentistry

**Whilst many people have access to an NHS dentist/dental services, we know for a lot of people, finding an NHS dentist that is accepting new patients is very difficult. We would like to hear about your experiences about how you are looking after your oral health if you do not have access to a dentist, and how both your physical and mental health may be impacted by this.**

**For Information: *If you have a dental emergency, are in pain and do not have a regular dentist, contact the Greater Manchester Dental Helpline on 0333 332 3800, 8am – 10pm (including weekends and Bank Holidays). Please note, each visit to the urgent dental care dentist will cost £23.80.***

1. Do you currently have access to a dentist in Bolton (NHS or Private)?

- Yes NHS
- Yes Private
- No access to either NHS or Private
- Not sure

2. If you do not have access to a dentist, can you tell us who needs access? For example this could be: children, someone living with a health and care need, a carer etc.

3. Have you had difficulty with any of the following?

- Getting a routine appointment
- Getting an urgent appointment
- Getting the treatment you need
- No difficulties
- Other (please specify)

4. Self-care, have you done any of the following to alleviate any dental issues you have such as dental pain?

- Used painkillers
- Looked after teeth, regular brushing, flossing etc
- Used temporary dental repair packs
- Other (please specify)



5. Do you know about the urgent dental care service?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

6. If you have not been able to access dental care (NHS or Private), has this impacted on your physical and/or mental health? Please tell us

- Yes my physical health
- Yes my mental health
- Both my physical and mental health
- none

Please tell us more

7. Have you seen/spoken to any other health or care professional (for example, Accident & Emergency, GP, social worker etc... )about your dental issues and how it is impacting your physical and mental health?

8. If you have struggled to access a dentist, is there anything else you would like to tell us?

## Response from Ben Squires

### Associate Director of Primary Care (Greater Manchester)

#### NHS Greater Manchester

1. Ensure that there are sufficient resources to allow people needing access to NHS dentistry can get the treatment they desperately need. Many people do not meet the criteria to access urgent dental care and are therefore left with nowhere to turn, and their dental issues needlessly becoming 'urgent'.

NHS Greater Manchester does seek to ensure access to meet urgent treatment need and have sustained additional urgent access capacity post the pandemic to meet the urgent care requirements of the population.

Access levels to NHS dental services in Bolton and across Greater Manchester continue to recover following the Covid pandemic. However, dental services are subject to a cash limited commissioning budget and there has never been a point whereby 100% of the population have had (or requested) access.

The public are reminded that check-up recall intervals should be based upon clinical treatment requirements and may vary from 3 months up to 24 months. In accordance with NICE guidance, a 6 monthly check up may not be required or appropriate.
2. Understand the wider impact on people's physical and mental health, of not having regular access to NHS dentistry.

The links between dental and oral health and wider physical and mental wellbeing are recognised. The Greater Manchester dental community (commissioners and providers working together) have developed a number of toolkits and initiatives to seek to support practices to provide holistic care for patients:

<https://gmpcb.org.uk/dentistry/dentistry-resources/>

However, it should also be acknowledged that oral health and wellbeing is not limited to the points of care delivered at a dental appointment.
3. Health professionals also need to be making their voice heard in the case to improve access to NHS dentistry.

NHS Greater Manchester has supported the establishment of the GM Primary Care Board, which is a collaborative of primary care providers, ensuring a strong voice into the GM system from primary care, including dental services.

Regular, bi-monthly meetings are held within each locality where there is a combination of Providers, Local authority reps, Local Dental Committee Chairs, Commissioners, and Consultants in Oral Health discuss locality issues and work through solutions.
4. If people are offered urgent care, when appropriate, ensure patients are referred to Greater Manchester Access Plus Scheme\* for the necessary follow-up treatment. This will prevent the patient from needing access to urgent dental care in the immediate future.

The Access Plus Scheme was established by NHS GM for this purpose. Any patient who was treated within the urgent care service and who needed further ongoing support could be referred to one of the Access Plus Practices who would offer further treatment were necessary.

5. Ensure that anyone with a maternity exemption certificate can access an NHS dentist. There are a number of exemption criteria from NHS dental patient charges. Access arrangements for NHS dentistry seek to support across population health inequalities and patient groups.
6. Understand and act on the need for children and young people to have access to adequate NHS dentistry. Prevention should be the key element so that children and young people are not storing up issues for the future. NHS GM continues to invest into oral health improvement and prevention for children and young families. Access for children and young people continues to be an identified priority, with commitment to services from Child Friendly Dental Practices and the Looked After Children scheme. All NHS Dental Practices are asked to prioritise children and young people.
7. Improve education and availability of free resources to help people understand the importance of looking after their teeth. This should be extended to care homes so that older people can maintain good oral health eg. people living with dementia. Oral health improvement and education sits as a statutory responsibility of the Local Authority, who should consider this recommendation. The NHS GM dental commissioning team have developed a Dementia Friendly Dentistry toolkit, which can be found at:  
[https://gmpcb.org.uk/dentistry/dentistry-resources/#Dementia\\_friendly\\_dentistry](https://gmpcb.org.uk/dentistry/dentistry-resources/#Dementia_friendly_dentistry)
8. Ensure that the NHS England website is kept up to date so that people can see if there are any NHS dentists offering vacancies. It is now a national NHS dental contractual requirement for practices to update their details on the NHS.uk website.
9. It is paramount that dental practices make provision for people with disabilities to access treatment. There are specialist service delivered by community dental services for adults and children with additional needs and disabilities.
10. Ensure that there is up to date information available for people to find out where they can access an NHS dentist and importantly - what they should do if they are unable to do this. There should also be readily available information regarding prevention and how to look after oral health. In addition to the national [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) website, the following website provides details specific to Greater Manchester dental services:  
<https://gmintegratedcare.org.uk/find-a-service/dentist/>



**Healthwatch Bolton**

**27 Silverwell St**

**BOLTON**

**BL1 1PP**

**Tel: 01204 394603**

**Email: [info@healthwatchbolton.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchbolton.co.uk)**

**Web: [www.healthwatchbolton.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchbolton.co.uk)**