

Accessing Dental treatment in the North East and North Cumbria

Getting Urgent Dental Care in the North East and North Cumbria – Mystery Shopping Exercise in February 2024.

1. Background

This data provides a snapshot in time of a resident in the North East and North Cumbria (NENC) trying to get urgent dental care.

We ran two phases of data collection:

Phase one – NHS contract holding practices – we contacted 287 dental practices between 1 and 15 Feb from a list provided by the ICB

Phase two – Private only practices – we contacted 117 private only dental practices on 26 Feb from a list we accessed from the CQC database

Volunteers from the Healthwatch Network contacted all practices using a standard script that had been reviewed by a Dentist at the ICB. We captured what happened on each call through a survey completed as the call was taking place.

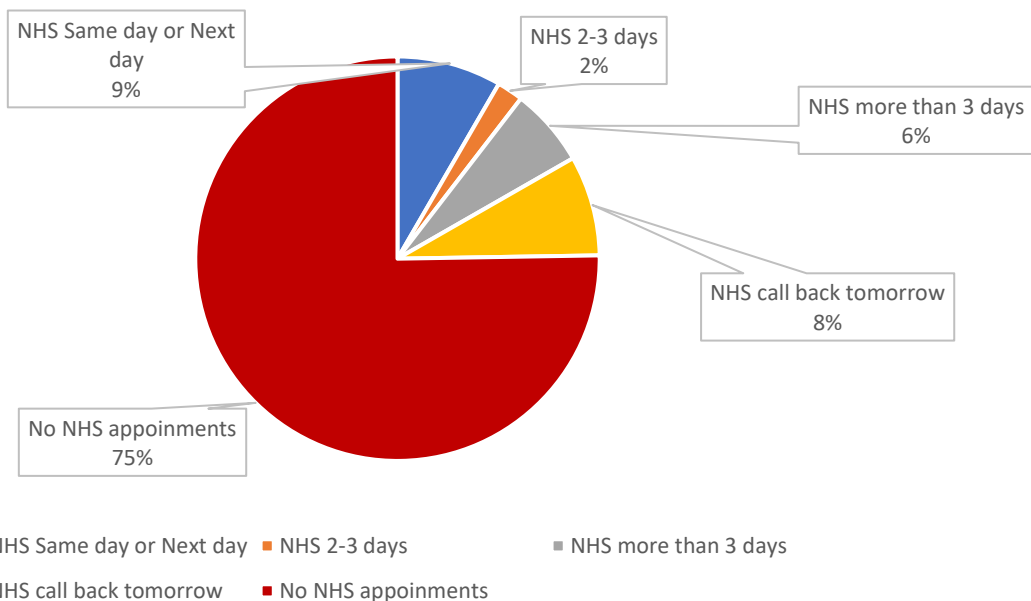
The scenario we asked about was someone who **does not have a regular dentist**, looking for urgent dental care, having had pain with a back tooth for 2 days that they are managing unsuccessfully with painkillers.

2. Getting urgent care

2.1 NHS service providers

- 24 (9%) of Practices offered an NHS appointment the same day or next day.
- 6 (2%) Offered an NHS appointment within 2–3 days.
- 18 (6%) Offered an NHS appointment more than 3 days away.
- 23 (8%) Said to call back tomorrow to see if an urgent care appointment is available
- 216 (75%) Offered no NHS appointments, of these one offered to join a waiting list and 93 of these offered a private appointment, many wanted paying up front for private appointments.

NHS Urgent Dental Appointments Offered



The geographical spread of practices offering appointments is below. This mystery shopping exercise highlighted that there were clear gaps in availability.

LA (no of NHS contracts in brackets)	NHS Same Day	NHS Next DAY	NHS appointment in 2-3 days	NHS appointment more than 3 days away	NHS Call back tomorrow	Total NHS offer
County Durham (49)	2	3	1	3	6	15
Cumberland (26)	1			1	1	3
Darlington (12)		1	1	1	2	5
Gateshead (22)	1	1		2	2	6
Hartlepool (9)						0
Middlesbrough (10)		1				1
Newcastle upon Tyne (31)		2	1	2	5	10
North Tyneside (20)	1	2	1	1		5
Northumberland (32)	1	2		4	4	11
Redcar and Cleveland (14)		2		1		3
South Tyneside (13)		1				1
Stockton-on-Tees (20)		1		1	1	3
Sunderland (19)		1	2	2	2	7
Westmorland and Furness (9)	1					1
Grand Total	7	17	6	18	23	71

The % of NHS practices offering appointments by local Authority Area is below.

LA	No of NHS practices	NHS appointments being offered	% of practices offering appointments
County Durham	49	15	31
Cumberland	26	3	12
Darlington	12	5	42
Gateshead	22	6	27
Hartlepool	9	0	0
Middlesbrough	10	1	10
Newcastle upon Tyne	31	10	32
North Tyneside	20	5	25
Northumberland	32	11	34
Redcar and Cleveland	14	3	21
South Tyneside	13	1	8
Stockton-on-Tees	20	3	15
Sunderland	19	7	37
Westmorland and Furness	9	1	11

From our wider research into dentistry, we know that most people who do not have a regular dentist surgery just phone round different dental practices until they can find an appointment. Our evidence suggests that unless you “get lucky” there is a real chance that you would have to make 5+ calls before you could find the help you need.

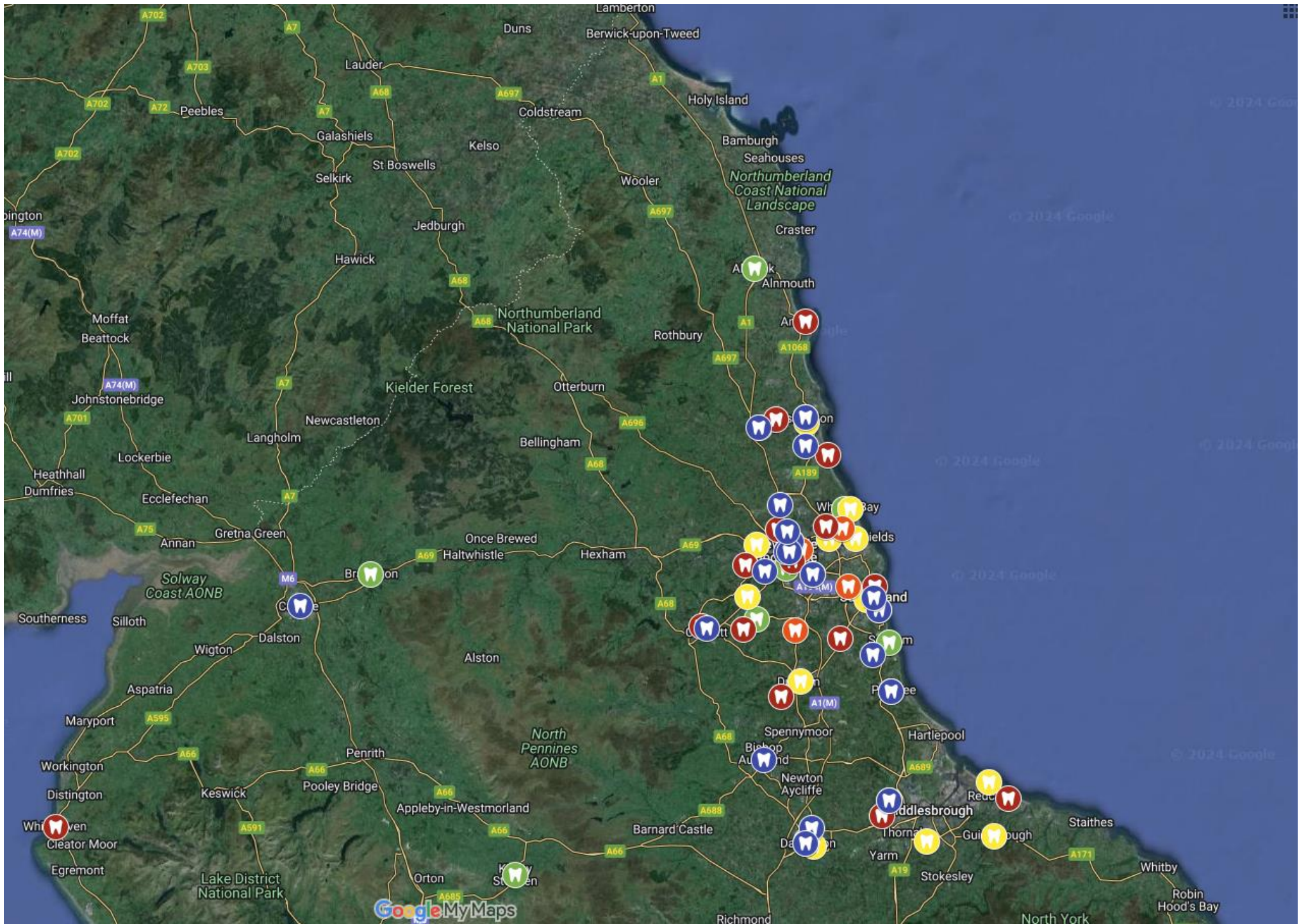
Mapping NHS appointments offered

We have built up a map that shows the location of what NHS services we were offered as part of this exercise. This is much better viewed online:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=14jBjHAilui5AT3w9nTbUfuxDLSCmxN8&usp=sharing>

The key to the map is below:

- Green pins - The Same day
- Yellow pins - Next Day
- Orange pins - 2 – 3 days
- Red pins - More than 3 days
- Blue pins - Call Back tomorrow



2.2 Private urgent dental care

Most dental practices in NENC offer private dental treatment, either 100% of their activity or alongside NHS activity. Whilst the focus of this research was getting NHS dental treatment, information about the availability of private urgent dental care was also obtained.

73 of the 117 private only practices we contacted offered urgent care. The initial consultation costs ranged from £50 to £182 (for a 30 minute consultation). Any treatment would incur an additional cost.

93 of the 287 NHS service providing practices we contacted also offered a private appointment. The initial consultation costs ranged from £49 to £120 with any treatment incurring additional cost.

3. Advice and support if a service cannot provide help

3.1 Advice and signposting from NHS providers

Of the 216 practices that could not book an NHS appointment...

- Only 17% of the NHS providers that did not offer an NHS appointment gave contact details of a different practice/s that they thought might be able to help. The details of the practices provided appeared to relate to those funded for additional sessions and volunteers found this really helpful. All others said to ring round other dentists.
- Only 5% gave advice about pain relief – ibuprofen and paracetamol
- 35% of these services advised people to call 111.

Our volunteers reported very different levels of customer service, with some services being very helpful and the volunteer felt listened to, however on the other hand, some staff came over as 'rude', 'disinterested' or 'hopelessly useless'.

3.2 Advice and signposting from private only providers

- Only 5% of private only practices signposted to another dental practice.
- Only 3 practices provided advice on pain management.
- 30% of private only practices signposted to 111 or the Urgent dental care line in South Cumbria and Lancs dental service 0300 1234 010; an urgent care dental service commissioned by the ICB in that area, that has one phone number that residents can access <https://www.lscft.nhs.uk/services/service-finder-z/dental-services> – see section 4.

We were disappointed by how unhelpful almost all these services were to people trying to find an NHS dentist. We found that the most helpful services were in the

south of Cumberland, and Westmorland and Furness as they were able to refer to the Urgent Dental services in South Cumbria and Lancashire.

3.3 Calls to 111

We are undertaking additional work to understand people's experiences of contacting 111 for support. This will follow.

4. The experience of residents.

Our volunteers described the frustration of having to ring round multiple services until they 'got lucky', with services being unwilling or unable to help with signposting. One volunteer described 'dancing round the kitchen when I was offered an appointment after 15 rejections'. This is a very real experience that marries up with what many residents have said they experience before they find a service willing to give them the care they need. This is particularly challenging when people are in pain.

5. Suggested actions

Alongside this snapshot of the availability of urgent dental care across NENC, Healthwatch are looking at the experiences of people who have received treatment through the additional investment sessions funded by the ICB and our community wide survey (currently with over 3,000 responses from across the ICB area). These actions will be added to as these projects conclude.

- 1) Information campaign for the public to understand what urgent treatment is available on the NHS and how best to access it – supported by key messages by service providers.
- 2) Clarity on the role of NHS 111 for residents and for services. Remind all practices that they should be referring people to contact NHS 111 (if that is the case).
- 3) To avoid residents having to phone around practices, NHS 111, the NHS website, and partners, they should have access to up to date information about which services are more likely to provide urgent NHS dental care.
- 4) The ICB should consider whether to invest in a NENC service similar to the South Cumbria and Lancs dental service 0300 1234 010. Our volunteers felt this was a very accessible service. If not, then the ICB should look at creating a single front door type approach to urgent dental care – this is beyond what 111 currently provide in NENC.
- 5) The ICB should address gaps in NHS urgent care provision, particularly in the North of Northumberland, North Cumbria, Hartlepool, parts of County Durham and Middlesbrough.
- 6) The ICB should consider the wider barriers and how to address these for people getting urgent dental treatment, particularly additional transport costs. We are concerned that health inequalities are being exacerbated.

Mystery Shopping Dentistry Script – urgent care

****Please note anything in blue italics, like this, is a note for yourself and NOT a question*

PLEASE REMEMBER THIS IS A SCENARIO, YOU MUST NOT ACCEPT OR BOOK AN APPOINTMENT

<p><i>To start conversation...</i></p>	<p><i>Please say:</i></p> <p>"Hello, can you help me please. I'm in a lot of pain with toothache and need to see a dentist. I'd like to book an urgent appointment please. I'm not registered with you."</p> <p><i>Record response</i></p>
<p><i>If asked to give details about your pain...</i></p> <p><i>If asked if you have any other symptoms e.g. swelling..</i></p>	<p><i>Please say:</i></p> <p>"I've had pain from a back tooth for 2 days and it's getting worse. Painkillers are not helping."</p> <p><i>Record response</i></p> <p><i>Please say:</i></p> <p>"No, none."</p>
<p><i>If asked where you live...</i></p>	<p><i>Please say:</i></p> <p>"5 minutes walk away"</p>
<p><i>If they can't give you an NHS appointment...</i></p>	<p><i>Please say:</i></p> <p>"I'm going to ring other practices to see if I can get an NHS appointment, but if I can't, how much would it cost me to be seen here privately? Could you see me quickly, if I pay?"</p> <p><i>Record response</i></p>
<p><i>If offered an NHS appointment</i></p>	<p><i>Please make an excuse to end the call using one of the following:</i></p> <p>"Someone is calling me, I have to go, I'll ring you back."</p>

<p>within 3 working days...</p>	<p>OR "There's someone at the door, I have to go, I'll ring you back." OR "My son/daughter will need to bring me to the appointment, so I need to check they'll be available, I'll ring you back. Thank you for your help."</p>
<p><i>If offered an NHS appointment over 3 working days away...</i></p>	<p><i>Please ask:</i> "How much is it to go private? Is it any quicker?" <i>Record response</i> <i>Make excuse to end call, as above</i></p>
<p><i>If offered a private appointment...</i></p>	<p><i>Please ask:</i> "How much is it?" / "How soon could that be?" <i>Record response</i> "Do you have any NHS appointments?" <i>Record response</i> <i>Make excuse to end call, as above, if offered appointment</i></p>
<p><i>If the practice cannot see you on that day or at all...</i></p>	<p><i>Please ask:</i> "Do you know if there is anything else I can do to get help?" <i>Record response and say:</i> "Thank you for your help"</p>