

Learning disabilities and dentistry

Recognising the challenges encountered by people
with learning disabilities at the dentist

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Summary..... | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Method..... | 4 |
| Findings..... | 5 |
| Next steps..... | 6 |
| References..... | 7 |
| Acknowledgements..... | 7 |
| Response..... | 8 |

Summary

Working with [Caring, Listening and Supporting Partnership](#) (CLASP), a self-advocacy group for people with learning disabilities in Wokingham Borough, Healthwatch Wokingham undertook a project to better understand feedback we had received about challenges people with learning disabilities in the borough are experiencing when visiting the dentist.

To gain insight, Healthwatch Wokingham sought out the input of CLASP members by conducting a survey in September 2023. Responses were received from 14 members of CLASP.

Most told us that their experience at the dentist was 'okay' or better than okay (84.6%), with 81.8% saying that they would return for future appointments. However, there were a few common themes within their responses about suggestions for improvement to dental services, centred around the dentist's understanding of their disabilities and the need for proper accommodations and reasonable adjustments.

Some direct quotes taken from the surveys completed, include:



Findings indicate there is an opportunity for providers to demonstrate how they recognise and understand the experiences of people with learning disabilities so that they are aware of the challenges that their patients may encounter. Offering an inclusive service involves accessible communication around the information that people are receiving about going to the dentist, such as the nature of procedures and their necessity.

Given the limited scope of this study, research needs to expand to encompass a wider range of individuals and their experiences as these numbers may not currently reflect all circumstances of people with learning disabilities. Additionally, exploring the reasons why some individuals may have not visited the dentist in a while could offer further valuable insight into how people with learning disabilities find this experience or lack thereof, and why.

Introduction

In this report, Healthwatch Wokingham Borough aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities when visiting the dentist.

After discussions with the CEO of CLASP, the Healthwatch team decided to explore this topic in more detail.

The Healthwatch team is already aware that this issue is acknowledged by the NHS ([NHS, 2023](#)) as they highlight that individuals with learning disabilities may require specialised dental care ([UK Government, n.d.](#)).

The NHS also states

that individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to experience “higher levels of gum (periodontal) disease, greater gingival inflammation, higher numbers of missing teeth, increased rates of toothlessness (edentulism), higher plaque levels, greater unmet oral health needs poorer access to dental services, and less preventative dentistry”.



Access to dentistry in general and specifically around the experiences of people with a disability, has been part of wider work by Healthwatch organisations across England.

For instance, Healthwatch Greenwich’s monthly feedback report (October 2023) explores different demographic groups and their perceptions of dentistry. When asked if they had visited the dentist within the past two years, only 62% of individuals with disabilities answered affirmatively, compared to 75% of those without disabilities. Similarly, in terms of sentiment analysis, only 47% of individuals with disabilities expressed positive experiences, while 66% of those without disabilities reported positive sentiments.



However, it should be noted that there is variation in terms of how easy individuals find it to get dental appointments. While 4% of respondents with disabilities found it very easy and 58% found it somewhat easy, a combined total of 62%, respondents without disabilities said that 21% found it very easy and 37% found it somewhat easy, totalling to 58%.

These findings emphasise a clear disparity between the experiences of individuals with disabilities and those without when it comes to dental care. It is important to acknowledge that the specific type of disability that individuals have may also influence the challenges they face. For example, individuals with physical disabilities may meet different obstacles compared to those with learning disabilities.

This research aims to further understand the issues that people with learning disabilities face across Wokingham Borough and what can be done to improve their experience at the dentist.

Method

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough worked in collaboration on the survey with [Promise Inclusion](#), a local charity that supports parents and carers with children and/or adults with learning disabilities, as well as CLASP.

The survey questions were reviewed to ensure that they were suitable for the target audience of people with learning disabilities. The Healthwatch team then adjusted the questionnaires to be inclusive, easy to read and understandable while addressing the issues highlighted by the CEO of CLASP.

The survey was then completed by CLASP members with help of their support workers, Healthwatch engagement officers, CLASP staff and volunteers. 14 CLASP members completed the survey who have a learning disability and/or physical disability.



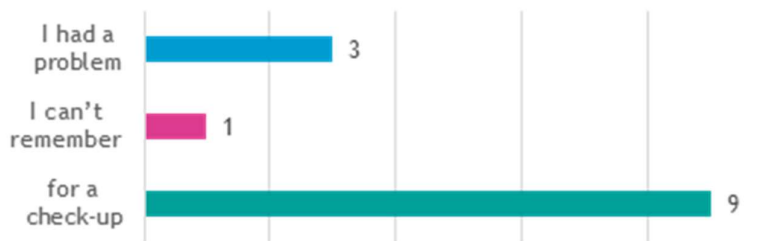
Above: surveys being completed by CLASP members in the presence of Healthwatch engagement officers, CLASP staff and volunteers, and CLASP members' support workers.

Findings

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough learned of the experiences of people with learning disabilities that suggest there are options for encouraging attendance which should be explored.

Here are the results of the survey and what they suggest about how people with learning disabilities experience appointments with their dentist.

Why did you go to the dentist?



Did you have to go back to have treatment?



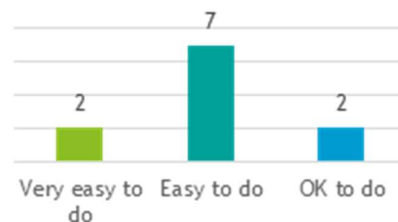
When members were asked why they had gone to the dentist most respondents said it was to have a dental check-up; 64.3% stated check-up and 21.4% stated for a dental problem.

When it came to booking appointments, most people did this on their own whether it was through the reception, over the phone, or pre booking which was the least used method.

How did you make the appointment?



If you made the appointment, how was it?



Members found the process of booking appointments ok, easy or very easy. This is shown by 4 people booking through the reception, 4 over the phone and 1 who pre-booked (a future appointment booked straight after having a routine dental checkup) compared to 2 people whose appointments were booked by a support worker, and 2 whose family members booked their appointments.

The 11 members that answered the question 'If you made the appointment, how was it?,' all answered positively or neutrally; 2 stated very easy, 7 stated easy, and 2 stated it was okay.

From these results booking a dentist appointment may not have been an issue. The results suggest it is likely there will be a group of individuals who have not gone to the dentist due to the process, which unfortunately we are not able to understand from the current research. Broadening the audience for responses will allow Healthwatch to better understand the implications for those with a learning disability.

Next steps

There are several key points that are important to focus on based on this preliminary research which could help people with learning and/or physical disabilities whilst attending the dentist. These are:

Provide comprehensive training or refresher training to high street dentists on learning disabilities and the unique challenges individuals face.

Make reasonable adjustments for individuals whilst they visit the dentist to improve their comfort and experience.

Give clear explanations to individuals undergoing dental treatment ensuring they fully understand what to expect and what is happening, so they are put at ease.

Implement designated 'quiet hours' within waiting rooms/areas to minimise overcrowding and to reduce sensory overload.

Provide clear guidance and instructions for individuals with learning disabilities to enable them to navigate their dental visits easily.

There would be benefit in extending this research with a larger sample size. This will help further understand how people with learning disabilities experience the dentist.

Conducting further research with individuals with learning disabilities who have not yet visited the dentist and comparing their outcomes to those without learning disabilities, as well as individuals with other forms of disabilities, will offer greater insight.

If completed as a collaborative piece of research, it can inform strategy and communications for the future.

References

Healthwatch Greenwich, Monthly feedback report, Oct 2023 [Online]

https://nds.healthwatch.co.uk/sites/default/files/reports_library/20231130_Greenwich_Monthly%20Feedback%20Report%20October%202023%20%28Public%29.pdf

NHS, Dental treatment for people with special needs, July 2023 [Online]

[Dental treatment for people with special needs - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)

UK Government, n.d., Oral care and people with learning disabilities, Nov 2019 [Online]

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/oral-care-and-people-with-learning-disabilities/oral-care-and-people-with-learning-disabilities>

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough would like to thank Promise Inclusion for their pivotal role in ensuring the accessibility and inclusivity of Healthwatch Wokingham Borough's survey. Their ability in refining the survey while incorporating best practices for accessibility was appreciated and played a vital role in crafting questions and formats that prioritise people with learning disabilities.

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough would also like to say thank you to CLASP for bringing this issue to our attention and supporting us in conducting the survey, whilst making sure that all participants felt supported and heard throughout the experience.

Response

This report has been discussed with the provider of learning disabilities in the area and the Thames Valley Local Network with a response below:

“The contract for Community Dental Services is with specialist led (Special Care and Paediatric) dentistry. The service is designed to support patients with learning disabilities in terms of staff training, expertise, facilities and treatment settings which includes hospital for treatment under General Anaesthetic.

Their contract is also designed to allow more time to treat patients with learning disabilities in that whilst the service delivers Units of Dental Activity (UDA) it only has a notional ‘UDA’ target which means monies are not recovered if the service does not deliver a minimum of 96% of its contracted activity.

The Thames Valley Community Dental Service has also established Reasonable Adjustment Working Group and is developing a proforma to support patients as they enter treatment.

Some of the proposals described in the attached report are more difficult for primary care practices in that they are required to deliver an agreed number of UDAs each year to avoid financial recoveries in relation to their contract. This means they have to achieve level of throughput that will enable them to provide the required range of services and meet their activity targets. This can also mean it is more difficult to set time in waiting rooms for patients who may need quiet time.

However, the Integrated Care Board (ICB) commenced the Flexible Commissioning service pilot in June 2023. This service is designed to provide more time for treatments for patients whose needs are greater due to gaps in attendance.

At the Local Dental Network meeting on 21st March we felt a similar principle could be applied to patients whose management needs are greater. It has been agreed to extend the service into 2024-25 and we are in the process of reviewing the service specification. We’ll include this issue in the review.”



healthwatch
Wokingham Borough

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough
Wokingham Charity and Community Hub
Waterford House, Erfstadt Court
Wokingham, Berkshire
RG40 2YF

www.healthwatchwokingham.co.uk
t: 01189 418 1418
e: enquiries@healthwatchwokingham.co.uk