

INVESTIGATING ACCESS TO NHS DENTISTRY IN BLACKPOOL 2024





Healthwatch Blackpool

Healthwatch Blackpool was established in April 2013 and is the local consumer champion of Health and Social Care as part of the implementation of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Our role is to bring the community voice to the attention of decision makers to support improvements and shine a spotlight on experience. We listen and understand local access to Health and Social Care in Blackpool, acting on feedback and driving change. We ensure that the community voice is considered in improving and celebrating our local services.

As part of our work, we have an information and signposting function, whereby members of the public have the opportunity to have their say on local services. Members of the community can share any enquiries directly with us to raise concerns or to shine a positive light on local services.

Introduction

Healthwatch Blackpool have carried out previous reports in relation to the lack of access to NHS dental services. We continue to receive enquiries from local people expressing difficulty in finding a dental practice that are taking on new NHS patients. As well as this, a number of enquiries have resulted in signposting local people to NHS Service Search to keep updated on whether new openings are available for NHS patients. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have spoken to many Blackpool residents left feeling frustrated and without an NHS dentist, with very little opportunity of being placed on a waiting list. There is clear evidence that this continues to be a local and national issue, with many people unable to access routine NHS dental services.

Healthwatch Blackpool have revisited work around NHS dental access to gain a clear understanding of the current offer from local practices.





What we did

Healthwatch Blackpool carried out a mystery shopping exercise in July 2024 and rang all Blackpool dental practices, using the NHS Service Search. We successfully made contact with 10 dental practices and 6 referral/emergency only. We produced a list of 5 questions to ask each dental practice to gain an understanding on NHS patient access and what services are currently available.

Our questions were aimed towards dental practices, however it was useful to gain an insight as to whether emergency provision could advise on how to find a dental practice accepting NHS patients.

Questions

- At the moment, are you accepting new NHS patients?
- If not, do you know when this will be available and is there a waiting list?
- Are you accepting children as NHS patients?
- Is it just private services you offer?
- Can you advise on where I can go to find out who is accepting NHS patients?



What we found

At the moment, are you accepting new NHS patients?

All 10 dental practices in Blackpool were not taking on any new NHS patients at the time of calling.

If not, do you know when this will be available and is there a waiting list?

5 dental practices reported that there is no waiting list for NHS patients.

5 dental practices did have a waiting list for new NHS patients however, these had reached full capacity and were closed. When asked when the waiting list would reopen, all 5 practices could not give a specific time frame.

"The waiting list has closed because it reached full capacity, I am unsure when it will reopen. It has been closed for 3.5 years now."

"I know the closest dental practices taking on new NHS patients is Manchester."

"We have hundreds and hundreds of people sat waiting on the list, I'm unsure if it will reopen at all."



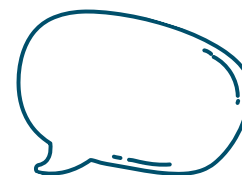


Are you accepting children as NHS patients?

9 dental practices are not accepting children as new NHS patients and only 1 will accept children under 10 years of age. There was however one practice that will be offering availability for children to join as an NHS patient in October. With limited access for children, monthly care plans for private access were on offer at a set price per month.

"We aren't currently taking on children but it opens up in October."

"No, but we have care plans for children at £30 a month."



Is it just private services you offer?

Currently, 9 dental practices only have capacity to offer private dental services, with a handful offering affordable monthly plans as an alternative. Some also deliver NHS dentistry, but do not have any availability within the provision at this time.

"Yes, but we do offer affordable private plans on a monthly direct debit. There's 3 prices to choose from."

"Yes, we have affordable care plans on a direct debit."

1 dental practice does not offer private services and is solely an NHS dental practice however, they aren't taking on new patients and have closed their waiting list due to reaching full capacity. Due to the large amount of people waiting on their waiting list, they struggle to open it up to new NHS patients as they work through those already waiting on their list.

"We don't do private services, its NHS only so when spaces become available, we work through our waiting list because it's so big."

Can you advise on where I can go to find out who is accepting NHS patients?

5 dental practices and 3 emergency dental services advised to keep ringing around local dentists and checking their websites.

"Keep ringing back to check."

"Ring around dentists."

"Ring around local dentist or query with emergency dentist."

"Ring around local dentists or check dentist websites."



3 dental practices were unsure on where to direct the general public and aren't told this information from their management team.

"I don't know, we aren't told where to direct people."

"I'm not sure, all I know is that Manchester are taking on."

"Management only know this."

"Unsure where to find this information."



1 dental practice and 1 emergency dental service advised on checking the NHS website whilst another dental practice suggested to ring the NHS Customer Service helpline.

"NHS website."

"Ring NHS Customer Service to find out."



NHS looks to improve dental access and oral health across Lancashire and South Cumbria

A report announced on 31 July, 2024, NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) are looking at ways to improve dental access and oral health across the region to help those with greatest need able to access NHS dentistry (2). By launching its dental access and oral health improvement programme, they aim to improve public understanding of NHS dental services and how to best look after their oral health (2).

For urgent dental treatment or advice please contact your usual dental practice in the first instance. Alternatively, the Lancashire and South Cumbria dental helpline can also provide advice, support and an appointment where required (1). Call 0300 1234010 between 8am and 9pm Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm weekends and bank holidays (1).

If you need to access a dentist in an emergency or out of normal hours, use NHS111 by visiting 111.nhs.uk or call 111 (1).

You should only go to A&E if you are suffering from heavy bleeding or have injuries to the face, mouth or teeth (1).

For more details on oral health, visit www.lancashireandsouthcumbria.icb.nhs.uk/dentistry.





Conclusion

In conclusion, the current situation in Blackpool presents significant challenges with a lack of availability for new NHS patients in local dental practices. No dental practices are currently accepting new NHS patients, limiting access to this service. Additionally, there is a concerning lack of services for children, with only one dental practice accepting new NHS patients under the age of 10. This highlights a critical need for improved access to routine dental care for all age groups within the community.

New patients can access routine dental care but are constrained to private services, with the cost of this being a significant barrier. To partially alleviate the costs that are associated with private dental care, a small amount of practices are offering monthly dental plans on a direct debit, providing an alternative for those seeking dental services in the area. However, it must be noted that the cost will still be unaffordable for many in the community.

Local residents would certainly benefit from clear information about local dentist provision and emergency options. It would be helpful for collaborative sharing of local information so that we understand capacity within services and share messages to promote good oral health.

The recent report announced from NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) indicates that there is great demand for improvements to be made surrounding NHS dentistry, accessibility of services and oral health awareness.

Acknowledgments

1. <https://www.lancashireandsouthcumbria.icb.nhs.uk/our-work/your-local-services/dentistry>
2. <https://www.blackpoolteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/about-us/latest-news/nhs-looks-improve-dental-access-and-oral-health-across-lancashire-and-south-cumbria>

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