



Dental Queries Received by Healthwatch Cheshire

November 2022 to September 2024

Background

Since June 2020, Healthwatch Cheshire has received increasing numbers of enquiries about accessing NHS dental care across Cheshire. In December 2022, Healthwatch published a report pointing out the main issues raised by people regarding dentistry from January to October 2022 (<https://healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Healthwatch-Cheshire-Dental-Queries-January-to-October-2022.pdf>).

The report, along with all comments and feedback received, was shared with the individual dental providers and NHS England who commission dentistry services.

This current report provides an update on dental access issues in Cheshire, covering the period from November 2022 to September 2024. During this time, Healthwatch Cheshire received 185 pieces of feedback related to dentistry.

Many of the key themes identified in the previous report have continued, including:

- Difficulties accessing and registering with NHS dentists
- Long waiting times for appointments
- Concerns about the cost of private treatment

However, some new themes have also appeared, such as:

- Increased financial burdens due to the need to pay for private care
- Specific challenges for vulnerable groups in accessing dental services
- Impacts on overall health and well-being due to lack of dental care

The feedback that we received continues to show the ongoing difficulties many Cheshire residents face in getting routine and emergency dental care through the NHS. This report shares people's experiences and highlights where dental services are falling short, aiming to push for improvements that meet local needs.

Number of Queries Received Relating to Dentists

Due to a longer reporting period, the total number of queries compared to the previous reporting period has increased to some level. However, there have been some variations month to month. The number of official queries from April to September 2024 (27) is lower than the same period in 2022 (129). However, this decrease in formal enquiries does not necessarily reflect an improvement in the situation.

During our engagement events and general interactions, we continue to hear regular remarks about the continuing difficulty in accessing NHS dental care. Many people share stories of friends, family members, or themselves struggling to find an NHS dentist.

Minor dental issues seem to be turning into more serious problems because people are not getting treatment in time. There is a growing awareness across Cheshire and the country about the difficulties in accessing NHS dental care. This widespread understanding might lead to fewer formal complaints, as many people see the shortage of NHS dentists as a well-known, ongoing issue rather than a personal problem that needs to be reported.

Although these informal discussions may not be entirely reflected in the feedback we received, they show that access to NHS dental care is still a major concern for many people in our community. The consistently high number of dental queries we receive confirms that this issue remains significant for many in Cheshire. Healthwatch is committed to helping individuals by providing advice and directing them to available services whenever possible.

Main Themes and Issues

The biggest issue is the struggle to **access NHS dental care**, which is the most common concern shared with Healthwatch Cheshire. Many people are struggling to find an NHS dentist even after searching a greater area for a long period of time. This has led to growing frustration and a sense of helplessness due to the ongoing shortage of NHS dental services.

Because of these problems with getting NHS dental care, more people are being forced to turn to **private dentists**, even when they would prefer not to. This is happening because NHS dentists are increasingly hard to access. The cost of private care is a cause for concern, especially with the current cost-of-living crisis. For those who cannot afford private care, their dental health is getting worse. Many are turning to emergency services, but these may only give temporary solutions without solving the main problem.

Based on the feedback received, these challenges are especially hard on **vulnerable groups** including pregnant women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and those on low incomes. They often face extra difficulties getting dental care, making health inequalities worse. People have also shared that poor access to dental care has impacted their overall health. They reported experiencing more pain, difficulty eating, and negative effects on their mental health and self-esteem due to dental issues.

While these challenges are the main focus of feedback, some people also shared positive experiences, especially when they were able to access NHS dentists. However, the fact that these problems are still around, and even getting worse in some areas, shows that current plans are not solving the deeper issues with accessing dental care. This highlights the urgent need for major changes in how NHS dental services are provided in Cheshire.

Demographics

Sexual Orientation	Orientation Count	Religion	Relig. Count	Ethnicity	Ethnicity Count
Heterosexual	14	Christian	2	White British	15
Asexual	1	Prefer not to say	1	Prefer not to say	1
Prefer not to say	2				

Age Group	Age Count	Gender	Gender Count	Disability	Disability Count
25-49 years	4	Female	19	None	3
50-64 years	7	Male	2	Long-standing illness	6
65-79 years	8	Prefer not to say	1	Physical Disability	2
80+ years	1			Sensory Disability	1
				Other	3
				Prefer not to say	1

The demographic data from dental feedback helps us better understand the issues in the report. It shows how problems with accessing dental care impact different groups of people across Cheshire.

The age distribution shows that most respondents are in the 50–64 (7 respondents) and 65–79 (8 respondents) age groups, highlighting the challenges older adults face in accessing dental care. There is also a noticeable gender imbalance, with 19 female respondents compared to just 2 males, suggesting that women may be more likely to report healthcare issues or may be more affected by problems accessing dental care. While specific economic data was not collected, the frequent mentions of treatment costs suggest that the lack of NHS dental access is creating additional financial burdens. Overall, this demographic data supports the report's findings about the widespread nature of dental access issues in Cheshire.

Difficulties Accessing and Signing up with NHS Dentists

Most of the feedback we received indicated significant difficulties in accessing NHS dental services, particularly in finding dentists who were accepting new patients. This issue affects a wide range of individuals, from children to pensioners. Many patients have been removed from NHS lists due to infrequent visits, while others have encountered long waits or have been unable to register or sign up at all. To cope with these challenges, some individuals have opted to travel longer distances to find available dental care, even in challenging circumstances such as pregnancy or old age.

- *"I've searched within a 15-mile radius of Winsford, Cheshire and there's nothing. I visited MyDentist in Winsford on 29th March [2023] and was quoted a fee of £21.6K. Who has over £20,000 to spend just like that?"*
- *"I live in CW8 but would be willing to travel as far as needed to get an appointment. I had a lot of issues with my teeth during my pregnancy and I have been trying to find a dentist ever since my baby was born (August 2022) as I am entitled to free care."*

The overall landscape of NHS dental care has become increasingly challenging, with barriers such as 'deregistration' due to missed appointments or the pandemic, as well as a growing trend of dentists shifting to private practice. These factors have led to limited options, long waiting times, and frustrations with communication, forcing some patients to seek private treatment.

Deregistered because of COVID and non-attendance

Deregistration from NHS dental practices has become an important barrier to dentistry access, often occurring without clear communication. Families who had been 'loyal' patients for years reported being removed from lists due to missed appointments or lack of attendance during the pandemic. This abrupt change has left individuals feeling frustrated and abandoned, especially when they have not received notification about this change.

- *"I have not seen my dentist in over three years due to the pandemic and my own poor health [that required me] to shield. I have not yet got in contact [but will] soon and am concerned I will have been taken off their list. If [so], I would want to make a complaint."*
- *My dentist de-registered me as a patient as I hadn't been during the two years of Covid outbreak. They did not inform me that I was being taken off their patient list. Cannot get an NHS appointment in any other practice. I have a maternity exemption form now but no dentists will take me on as NHS patient still.*
- *No NHS dentist in my area. I was taken off my dentist's list after lockdown.*



It's impossible to get NHS treatment in the area [where] I live. When we hear of a dentist taking on NHS patients you nearly have to camp outside the surgery to try and get your name down.



Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A caller mentioned that he and his family had been going to the same dentist for over 10 years, but his wife and children had been told very bluntly that they were no longer on the patient list. He, however, was still able to make appointments. The lack of communication from the dental practice and the idea that, despite paying taxes, there was no accessible dental service for the whole family was upsetting.

A woman said she had been told by a Dental Practice that she was no longer on their books post-COVID. She had been a patient since childhood. They told her to keep trying to see when they take new patients again. She said she never received the [letter] and felt the receptionist was rude, saying, 'Well, you'll have to just find somewhere else.'

Dentists Going Private Causing Severe Access Issues

A growing trend among dental practices to move to private care has made it difficult for patients to access NHS services. Many people are struggling to find NHS dentists who are accepting new patients, leading to long searches and waiting periods. This shift to private care not only limits options for people who rely on NHS services but also forces some to pay out-of-pocket for treatment.

- *A man rang to ask how he could find an NHS dentist. He had just finished a course of treatment with his dentist in Northwich when they told him that they were going private. He has since contacted many dental practices and has not found any taking on new NHS patients.*
- *"No appointment available even for regular check-ups."*
- *'They [the dentist practice] 'deregistered' us from a Dental Practice in Northwich after being a patient for 40 years. We were not informed we would no longer be treated as an NHS patient until after my spouse died. There was a lack of communication about this and we found the reception staff [to be] abrasive when raising the issue.'*
- *"Moved into the area. Unable to get an NHS dentist but could get one straight away if I signed up to a private plan."*

- *"They [the dental practice] refused to see me because I am registered with an NHS dentist. My dentist is not able to provide me with NHS treatment. I have been told that they will be going private shortly."*

Long Waiting Times for Appointments

Even when registered, many respondents report waiting months, with some unable to get through on the phone or being forced to visit the practice in person. The lack of timely follow-up appointments and limited availability have led to further frustration.

- *"I have been waiting for around 30 months [as of 07th March 2024] to get [an] appointment, and still no availability."*
- *"I have been waiting for 18 months for a dentist appointment."*
- *"Practice won't give you a follow-up appointment that is at a suitable time for you. They text message you after an appointment with days/times you can't make, wasting lots of time for both the patient and the surgery."*
- *"My 2 grandsons have been waiting for an NHS dentist since 2020. Dental provision is pretty much non-existent."*
- *"No longer registered with a dentist. Need an emergency dental appointment. [I have been] ringing [them] 30 times each day from 8:00 until 09:30, when a recorded message advises me to try again tomorrow."*

Telephone call taken by Healthwatch

A man said he was very 'frustrated' as he had tried on three different occasions to get through to a Dental Practice to book an appointment, trying for 10 to 15 minutes each time. He ended up going to the practice to arrange an appointment [that was] out of his way.

Poor Quality Treatments

People have expressed concerns about the quality of care received from NHS dentists, with some experiencing poor treatments that have worsened their dental problems. Cases of badly fitted dental work, delayed responses to infections, and unconcerned attitudes toward patients' complaints have contributed to a loss of trust in NHS dental care. In some cases, patients were forced to seek costly private treatment or go without necessary care altogether.

- *"I spent over £2,500 with a dentist in Crewe who fitted two metal plates. This caused me to have a problem with bone erupting from a previous dentist [who had] chipped my jaw. [They] sent me to hospital orthodontic services who [removed] the bone. A year or so down the line, during COVID, the tooth my denture was anchored on broke, leaving the root in situ. I have been back to [the] dentist; they are not interested in treating me without charging me hundreds of pounds I do not have."*
- *"I had some partial dentures made by my dentist. They were made on the NHS. I paid £310 for them. When I put them in, I cannot eat (even soft food) or speak properly. I went back to the dentist and spoke to the Practice Manager. I put the dentures in to demonstrate the problem and was told that because they were NHS dentures, they could do nothing more for me."*
- *"Poor quality; crown refitted and fell off"*

Telephone call taken by Healthwatch

A caller had several teeth extracted in the first week of April at a Dental Practice. She was in pain over the weekend, contacted them (the practice) on Monday, and was given an appointment for mid-April. When she attended, she was told her usual dentist had an emergency and saw an alternative dentist rather 'unhappily'. She received a letter from the dentist saying she had been abusive (which she denies) and was no longer welcome at the practice. She is still in pain and struggling to eat (feedback received on the 25th of April 2024).

DIY Treatments and Temporary Solutions

With long waiting times and private care being too expensive, some patients have felt they had no option but to manage their dental issues themselves or are sometimes suggested DIY (Do-it-yourself) solutions by dentists. Many resorted to temporary fixes, such as using over-the-counter dental kits to manage cavities or extracting their own teeth when professional care was inaccessible.



They are continually building new homes here and there is absolutely no infrastructure to support this. This is a huge health inequity as far as I'm concerned. I've had to extract one of my own teeth and buy a dental kit to try and do things for myself.



Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A family member, who had been an NHS patient for many years, was informed after getting a filling that his dentist was retiring. He was told to wait for a new NHS dentist or pay for a private one. Three weeks after the filling, it fell out. When he contacted the practice, he was advised to wait for an NHS dentist or buy a temporary filling kit. Concerned, he called back to request an appointment with the hygienist, who provided a temporary filling but noted that it needed proper treatment soon. Initially, the price was agreed to be just over £30, but when he went to pay, they attempted to charge over £60, changing the fee once it was challenged.

A man said he'd been waiting for over 2 months for treatment. He said he had been offered private treatment quickly, but it was double the price and he couldn't afford it. He was told to 'do it yourself' with a kit which he tried, and the filling fell out. He is still on the waiting list.

Forced to Pay for Private Treatment

With the increasing shift of NHS dentists going private, many patients are left with no choice but to pay for private care. This situation has been particularly challenging for those on lower incomes, such as pensioners, who struggle to afford even basic check-ups. In some cases, patients have been removed from NHS dental lists with little or no communication and are forced into private payment schemes just to maintain minimal dental care. These sudden changes have left many feeling abandoned by their longstanding practices, unable to afford necessary treatments, and worried about how to manage their dental health going forward.

- *"It took me seven months to get an emergency appointment at this clinic for a root canal or extraction. I am in a lot of pain and decided I preferred an extraction. I was there for an hour, but nothing was done. The dentist said my teeth were healthy and that an extraction [wasn't] best. They [indicated they] needed to send me to the hospital for further advice. I feel they wasted my time, and I lost over an hour's wages. They prescribed medication, but within an hour of returning home, they called to say they couldn't provide the full prescription on the NHS. I'm desperate to get this resolved, but this clinic seems unable to provide full NHS treatment and may go fully private soon. I need an examination from a dentist who knows what they are doing; this dentist doesn't seem capable."*
- *"I was taken off my dentist's list after lockdown. I recently had toothache and I knew I needed a filling. In the end, I had to go private for an examination – I had to pay £595. Unfortunately, the dentist could not get the roots out when I had the extraction so I was referred back to the NHS for oral surgery which has cost me £65. To say I'm angry is an understatement, I was made redundant last year so had the money to pay the bills without getting into debt but at 60 years of age I didn't expect to pay nearly £700 for dental treatment and what would have happened if I didn't have the money?"*

Many respondents highlighted growing financial pressures related to accessing dental care. With a significant number of NHS dentists shifting to private practice, patients, especially those on fixed incomes like pensioners,

are struggling to afford basic dental services. Some have resorted to paying monthly fees to remain on private lists just for check-ups while being unable to cover more extensive treatments.

- *"[As for dentists,] there are no NHS dentists; the nearest one in Cheshire is in Sheffield! I'm on a small pension and can't afford the hundreds of pounds to maintain teeth suffering from poor health (not from an unhealthy lifestyle—[I] eat healthily—[I'm] just old). All my working life, I paid National Insurance, and I never expected to be let down so badly."*
- *"My NHS dentist said she couldn't remove my bridge to access a root canal that needed filling and that I had to go private. I was quoted £2,400 for the complete job. I paid £400 to have the bridge removed but found a cheaper quote of £1,000 to do the filling. I can't afford a bridge, so I'm left with a large gap. I'm an NHS patient but will now take out insurance for private treatment."*

Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A caller mentioned that her dentist in Macclesfield had gone private and removed her from their list. She had contacted all dentists in her area, but no one was taking on NHS patients. As a pensioner, she cannot afford private treatment and is struggling to find a decent dentist. She felt dissatisfied with how her dentist had treated her. As of April 2023, she was paying £12.99 a month to her current dentist to be a private patient, which allows her to have check-ups, but if she needs treatment, she does not know how she could possibly afford it.

Another patient had been unable to attend appointments as they had no one to care for their spouse who had dementia. This seemed unfair, as it did not allow them a chance to explain their situation. The practice can take them on as a private patient, and while they signed up for the Options scheme, they object to paying £1,000 for the required treatment.

- *"I'm trying my best to get my children into this dentist under the NHS, but they won't accept them. I can't afford to pay for all their check-ups, and the staff are unhelpful and speak to you poorly on the phone."*
- *"I'm 80, on a state pension, and not allowed any extra benefits, making it difficult to pay for a dentist. When I finally saved enough to make an appointment with my registered dentist of six years, I found out I had been removed from the register for not attending check-ups, even though I had no problems. Now I don't have a dentist and am terrified of what to do if I get [a] toothache."*
- *"I have been a patient of [Name] for many years and never had a complaint until today, thanks to the rude and arrogant receptionist. If you expect a professional and caring experience, this is not the place for you. I was ordered to pay in full immediately, even though I explained I always pay in full when the treatment is completed. She abruptly told me, 'That's not how I do things. You need to pay now. Have you not got the money?!' Please understand I am an elderly, proud person (and yes, I do have the money). I expressed my frustration and agreed to pay, but she replied, 'I'm not here to deal with this. I can't be bothered with you,' and walked off. She humiliated me in front of others. It was rude and unnecessary."*

Impact on Mental Health and Wellness

The inability to access timely and affordable dental care is also taking a toll on patients' mental health. Many have expressed feelings of distress, anxiety, and fear related to their dental experiences, particularly when faced with financial pressures or poor communication from their dental practices. These situations have caused emotional strain, with some patients feeling overwhelmed and hopeless about their ability to receive proper care. Additionally, for people already dealing with anxiety or dental phobias, the lack of consistent treatment exacerbates their concerns, further affecting their overall well-being.



I was in tears yesterday – it's a really horrible situation and will only get worse. I contacted Healthwatch and my MP a couple of years ago about the same issue. Absolutely nothing has changed.



- *“My brother desperately needs to see a dentist, but he is very anxious about going. His teeth are in very poor condition.”*

Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A caller mentioned having a ‘distressing’ experience during a recent dental appointment. Despite never having issues before, this visit left them feeling terrified and reluctant to return, causing significant emotional distress and fear about future dental care.

Another caller reported that when her husband contacted the surgery to book check-ups for them both, he learned that his wife was no longer registered. Upon her inquiry, they explained that she had been removed from their list due to not contacting them for the past three years. They claimed to have sent her a request for a check-up but received no response. She believes this might be related to their move two years ago, although she had recently replied to a survey regarding the practice's relocation. Her husband is still receiving treatment, but they informed her that she cannot receive NHS care. Initially told she couldn't be added to the NHS waiting list, she later received an email stating she was placed on the list but remains unaware of its length. The practice offered her a check-up as a private patient, which she cannot afford as she receives pension credit and free NHS dentistry. This situation has left her feeling extremely distressed and anxious.

Unequal Access to Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, disabled individuals, homeless people, and asylum seekers, face significant challenges in accessing NHS dental care. Many of these individuals require specialised or frequent treatment due to their health conditions, but financial constraints and deregistration from NHS lists leave them without care. Pregnant women and disabled individuals, for example, report being unable to find a dentist or afford private treatment, often going untreated for long periods despite urgent needs. Disabled individuals have reported discrimination during appointments, with some treated as inconveniences, while children with special educational needs, such as those with autism, often face delays in care, resulting in prolonged pain.

- *A pregnant woman told Healthwatch that she has been unable to find an NHS dentist and aware that her pregnancy could change the health of her teeth.*
- *"I am disabled and unable to work, so I cannot afford dental care. I'm on Alendronate Acid, which requires regular dental visits because it can damage the jawbone. My 10-year-old son has never missed an appointment until our local dentist went private."*
- *"As a refugee [I] cannot contact the GP or dentist directly to get an appointment."*
- *"I have been a patient at this practice since I was young. I'm now 26 years old and wheelchair-dependent. Today, I saw [name], who was extremely rude and irritated that I cannot get out of my chair. I had a filling put in while in my chair last year. I left this check-up in pain and upset. I specifically asked to see a different dentist for future visits."*
- *"My son is 6, non-verbal, and has special educational needs. While on holiday, we saw an emergency dentist who said he needed a tooth removed. Our dentist referred him to [Dental Surgery Name] for sedation due to his sensory issues. When I chased the referral, they said the waitlist is 4 to 6 months. I explained he was in pain and self-harming, but they said he was not urgent. He is in significant pain, and we can't keep feeding him Calpol for that long."*

Additional Findings

Positive Comments

Much of the positive feedback we received indicates that while patients have accepted the poor conditions of NHS dentistry, they are generally content with the basic services they can access, recognizing that there is little they can do to change the situation. The positive feedback is also shared with the respective practices.

- *“Great overall dentist service. I was able to switch to a dentist downstairs once I struggled with the rather steep stairs.”*
- *“I have an NHS dentist who outperforms any private dentist I have ever had in every aspect. I can get appointments at short notice, get regular reminders of appointments and am treated with both professionalism and courtesy.”*
- *“The hygienist [Dental Practice Name] in Crewe provided excellent, person-centred care in view of heightened pain and sensitivity due to fibromyalgia. The hygienist asked how I was and if I had had any problems with my teeth, and listened with care to sensitivity issues, particularly around cold temperatures.”*

Access to Accurate Information

Healthwatch regularly uses and refers people to the NHS website during engagement events and via telephone and email. In our previous report, we highlighted concerns about outdated information on the NHS website regarding dental practices. We continue to receive comments around the information being out of date. Many people have reported that dental practices listed as accepting new NHS patients are not currently doing so when contacted.

Next steps

Healthwatch Cheshire are continuing to monitor queries regarding dentistry and encourage anybody with issues accessing a dentist to share their experience with us on our online Feedback Centre:

<https://healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk/>

<https://healthwatchcwac.org.uk/>

Our findings and reports are fed into Healthwatch England to help build up a national picture of the situation.

We share all comments and feedback with individual dental providers locally, and also NHS England who commission dentistry services. We will continue to work together using regular meetings and contact to raise concerns and provide feedback.

Further information

We advise callers that if they are experiencing bleeding, swelling or pain to their mouth they should call NHS 111 for triage, or call the Emergency Dental Helpline on 0161 476 9651.

If you have any queries regarding this report or would like to talk to us regarding support, please contact:

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