



Access to Dental Care in Luton

We asked: You shared your experiences.

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Summary of the Research

This research was carried out using **feedback cards distributed at community events across Luton**, together with a programme of **telephone calls to local dental practices**. The feedback cards gathered the public's experiences of accessing NHS dental care, while the practice calls were designed to understand **current availability, waiting times, and barriers to registration** directly from providers.

The cards did not request personal information such as age, gender, or ethnicity, so the findings cannot be broken down by demographic group. Instead, the reach of the work reflects the diversity of the community events where the cards were distributed. These events engaged residents from a wide range of backgrounds — including families, older people, LGBTQ+ individuals, and groups who may not usually take part in formal research.

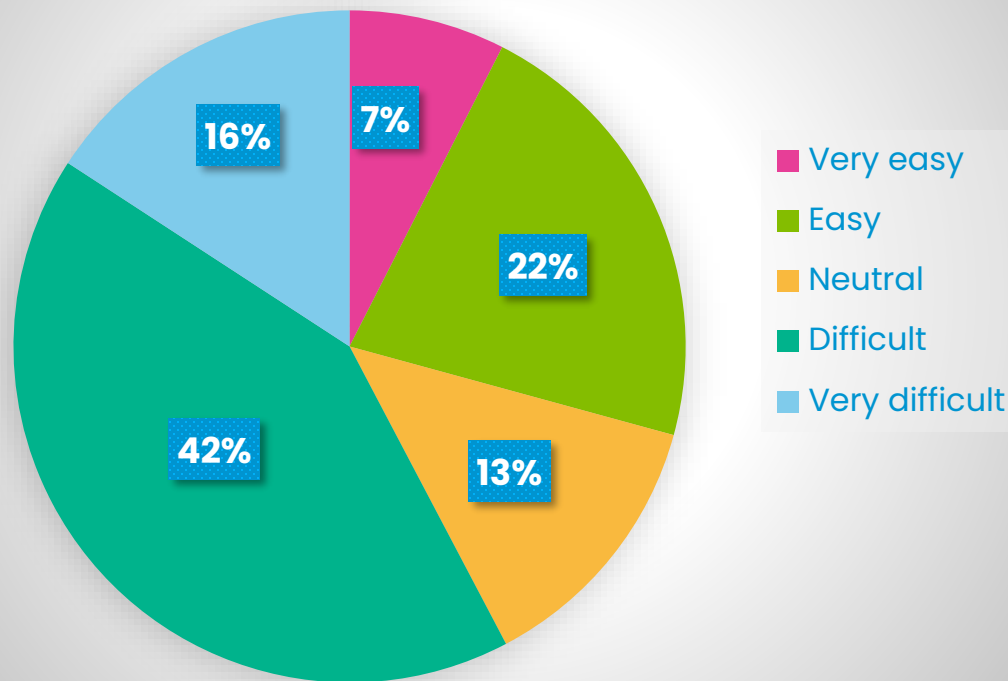
This combined approach allowed Healthwatch Luton to explore both **public experience** and **provider capacity**, creating a fuller picture of local dental access. It proved highly effective, producing a substantial number of responses in a short period and revealing consistent themes around difficulties in finding an NHS dentist, long waiting times, and reliance on emergency care routes.

By meeting people where they are and directly engaging with dental practices, the project provided a **balanced, evidence-based snapshot** of how residents experience NHS dental services in Luton — highlighting both good practice and ongoing challenges.

We Asked:

How easy is it to access Dental Services?

Responses



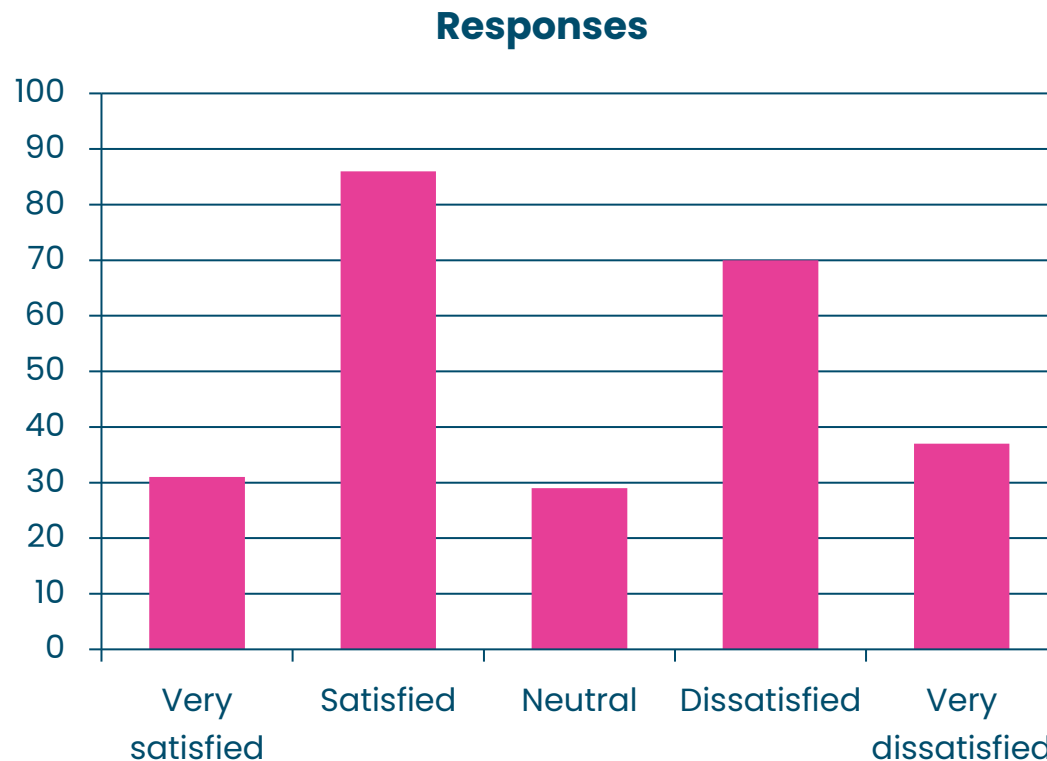
Among 253 people surveyed, views on Dental access varied widely.

The largest group — over 42% — said it was difficult, and another 16% found it very difficult.

Around 29% said it was easy or very easy, showing mixed but often challenging experiences.

We Asked:

How satisfied were you with the time it took to get an appointment?

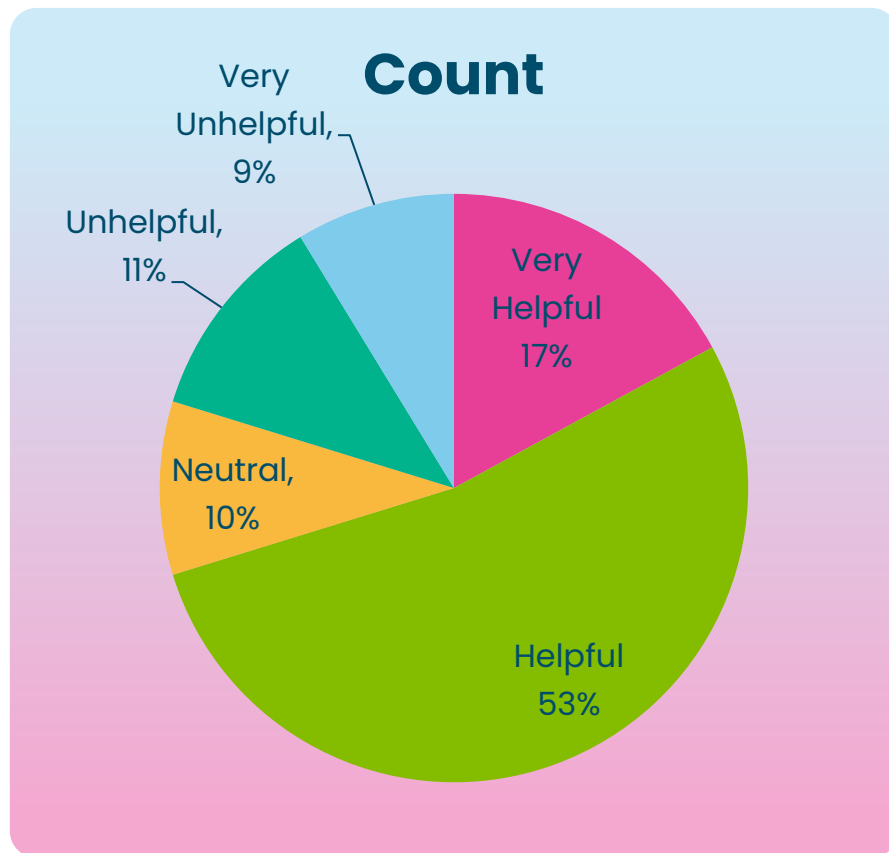


Around **42% of respondents** said they were *dissatisfied* or *very dissatisfied* with how long it took to get a dental appointment.

A similar proportion (46%) were *satisfied* or *very satisfied*, while **11%** were *neutral*, suggesting that views on waiting times are divided but lean slightly negative.

We Asked:

How satisfied were you with the service and treatment you received?



Most patients (**70%**) rated their dental care as *helpful* or *very helpful*, while **20%** found it *unhelpful* or *very unhelpful*.

This shows that, although access to NHS dental services can be difficult, satisfaction levels are generally high once people receive treatment.

Some respondents also described positive experiences with specific dental staff or practices, suggesting that quality of care remains strong even where availability is limited.

We explored your responses further:

Patients who were able to secure a dental appointment were most likely to describe their care as **Helpful** or **Very Helpful**, showing that the quality of treatment remains strong once access is achieved.

However, a notable minority still rated their experience as **Unhelpful**, suggesting that even after being seen, **communication, treatment outcomes, or overall experience did not always meet expectations.**

Access challenges don't always mean poor care —

While **58% found it difficult** to access an NHS dentist, **70% rated their treatment as helpful** once seen. This contrast shows that satisfaction with care remains high, but the struggle to access services continues to shape how people feel about their overall experience.

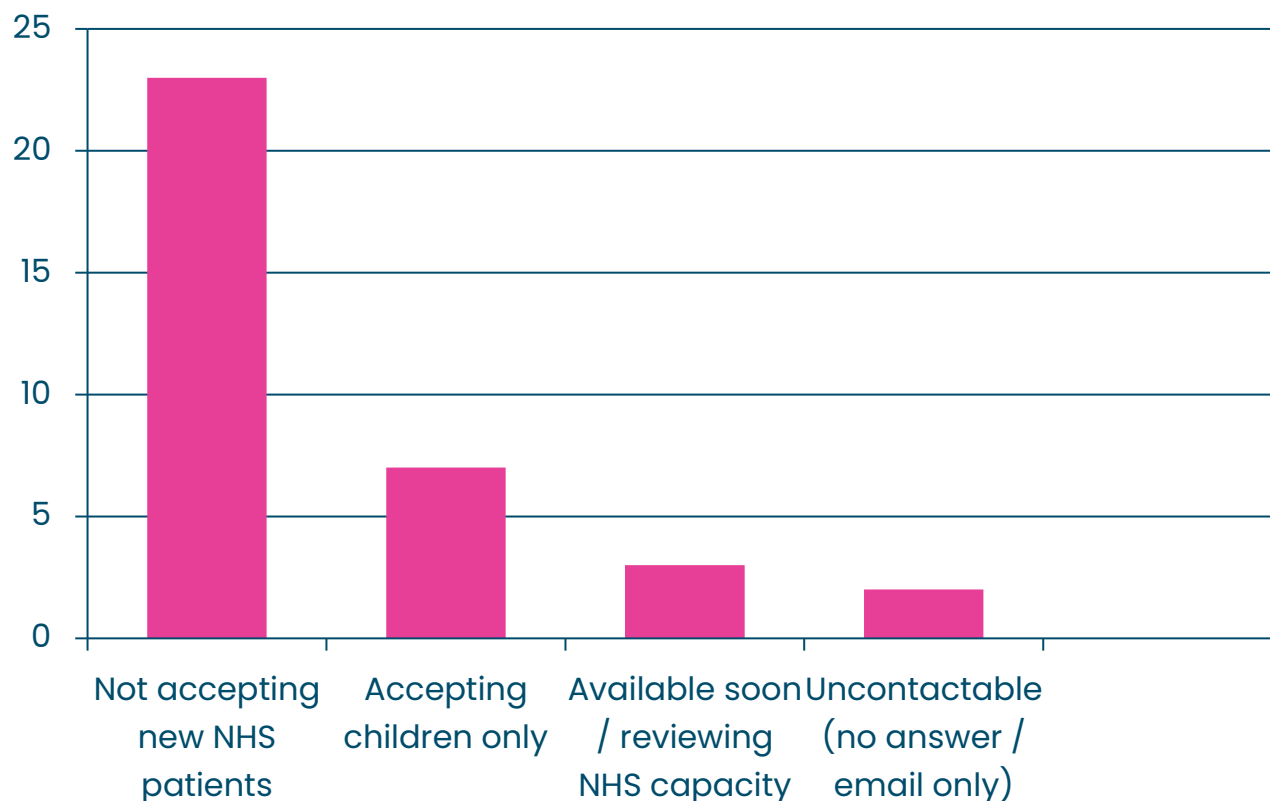
“Once I was finally seen, my dentist was brilliant — but it took months to get an appointment.”

— Resident feedback from community engagement event, June 2025

Practice Engagement:

Understanding NHS dental availability in Luton

Count (out of 35 practices contacted)



Among 35 practices contacted, **66% were not accepting new NHS patients**, with a further **20% taking children only**.

Only a few reported reviewing availability or could not be contacted.

From Waiting Lists to Limited Capacity: The Ongoing Challenge of NHS Dental Access

As **concerns continue to rise** about NHS dental availability, Healthwatch Luton gathered insight from both residents and local dental practices to understand the current picture of access.

Across Luton, dental access remains highly constrained.

Around **two-thirds of practices (66%)** reported that they were **not accepting new NHS patients**, and **a further 20%** said they could only accept **children** under NHS contracts.

A small number (**9%**) indicated that they were **reviewing capacity**, though no timescales were confirmed.

Public feedback reinforced these findings:

58% of residents described access to NHS dental care as *difficult* or *very difficult*, with some reporting that they had been unable to find a dentist taking new patients for over a year.

While these pressures do not necessarily reflect the quality of care once received — as most patients rated treatment as *helpful* or *very helpful* — they continue to highlight an urgent issue of **availability and equity** in NHS dental provision across the borough.

Limitations of Research

This research provides a valuable snapshot of NHS dental access and patient experiences in Luton, but it also has clear limits.

Appointment availability:

We asked about access to NHS dental appointments, but the data does not indicate how long people had been waiting or how many attempts they made to find a dentist.

Type of treatment:

We know whether people received dental care and how helpful they found it, but not what type of treatment they accessed (e.g. routine check-up, urgent, or emergency).

Practice variation:

Findings combine information from multiple dental practices, so differences between individual practices cannot be fully seen.

Demographics:

The survey did not capture age, gender, ethnicity, or other demographic information that may influence access or experience.

Limitations of Research

This research provides a valuable snapshot of NHS dental access and patient experiences in Luton, but it also has clear limits.

Scope of calls:

While calls were made to all NHS dental practices in Luton, not all were contactable. Data reflects information available at the time of contact and may change as practices update their NHS capacity.

Trends over time:

Findings represent a single point in time and do not show changes in dental provision or patient access across months or years.

Underlying reasons:

While respondents described access as easy or difficult, we do not know which specific factors (such as cost, availability, communication, or previous experience) influenced these views.

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Summary of Findings and Next Steps

NHS dental care remains one of the most significant local challenges. Many people reported repeated attempts to register with a dentist, with some waiting months or even years for an NHS appointment. Others described turning to private care, travelling outside the area, or using emergency dental services as a last resort.

Calls made to dental practices across Luton reinforced these concerns. **Two-thirds of practices were not accepting new NHS patients**, while around **one in five accepted children only**. A small number indicated that they were reviewing NHS capacity but were unable to confirm when new spaces might become available. Staff shortages, high demand, and limited NHS contract scope were common reasons given for restricted access.

Despite these barriers, **the majority of patients rated their dental treatment as helpful or very helpful once seen**, showing that care quality remains high even when access is limited. However, the ongoing mismatch between public demand and provider capacity continues to affect confidence and equity in dental provision.

Healthwatch Luton will continue to **monitor NHS dental availability, share updated access information with the public, and work with commissioners to review local capacity and contract distribution**. Further research will explore how workforce pressures, communication, and cost affect access, supporting a coordinated approach to **improving availability and patient experience across the borough**.



About Healthwatch Luton

Healthwatch Luton is the local champion for people using health and social care services across Luton. We promote choice and influence the provision of high-quality health, social care, and wellbeing services for all in our community.

Healthwatch Luton (HWL) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voices of local people are heard and acted upon by those who commission, deliver, and regulate health and care services. HWL engages with all parts of Luton's diverse population to ensure that a broad range of experiences and views are considered, understood, and reflected in decisions about care. Our work is rooted in strong community connections and grounded in the real-life experiences of the people we serve.

Healthwatch Luton is part of the wider Healthwatch network across England, one of three local Healthwatch organisations in Bedfordshire. We belong to a national network supported by Healthwatch England, which provides guidance and oversight to ensure local Healthwatch work consistently and effectively in each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

As the only independent body focused entirely on people's experiences of health and social care, our role is to make sure that these services—and the decisions surrounding them—are shaped by the people who use them. At Healthwatch Luton, we believe that everyone's voice matters and should be at the heart of care.



For more information

Healthwatch Luton
Futures House, The Moakes,
Marsh Farm
Luton
LU3 3BQ

www.healthwatchluton.co.uk

t: 01582 817 060

e: info@healthwatchluton.co.uk



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