

Experiences of accessing NHS dental services since the pandemic



Healthwatch Islington

Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and all sections of the community.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

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Introduction

"I'm having a hard time finding a dentist taking NHS patients. Everyone is only taking private patients, which is unaffordable for me... Please help, I've looked everywhere."

Resident contacting our advice and information service, November 2021

Many people have reported difficulties accessing NHS dental services in Islington since the pandemic. Healthwatch Islington's advice and information service provides signposting and ongoing support to local residents who need help to access health, social care and wellbeing services. Before July 2020, no one had contacted us with a request for help finding an NHS dentist. Since then, the number of people contacting us with this problem has steadily increased. Currently four out of five residents who contact us about a problem to do with dentistry are doing so because they can't find an NHS dentist.

Our signposting service helped 64 residents resolve issues related to dentistry between July and December last year. 53 of these residents contacted us because they were unable to access NHS dentistry. We do our very best to support people until they get the outcome that they need. That can take a few hours or a few months, depending on the particulars of each case. This type of engagement is not superficial. The purpose of this report is to share what we have learned from this work.

We undertook these additional engagement activities, and include relevant findings in the pages that follow:

- ▶ An online survey running between September and December 2021 with 31 responses
- ▶ Healthwatch volunteers conducted phone interviews with staff at 19 dental practices
- ▶ Healthwatch volunteers conducted phone interviews with 6 care home managers

It's important to note that the feedback shared in this report is about the experience of accessing dental services and not about the quality of care. Generally speaking, feedback on the quality of care tends to be positive.

People are struggling to access NHS dental care

The table below shows the increase over time in residents contacting our information and advice service for help with issues related to dentistry, with particular reference to requests for help finding an NHS dentist

Time Period	Total number of signposting cases	Number of cases that are about dentistry	Dental cases as % of total cases	'Please find me an NHS dentist' requests
July - Sep 2019	31	3	10%	0
Oct - Dec 2019	37	3	8%	0
Jan - Mar 2020	39	1	3%	0
April - Jun 2020	32	1	3%	0
July - Sep 2020	71	6	8%	2
Oct - Dec 2020	61	6	10%	3
Jan - Mar 2021	81	9	11%	8
April - Jun 2021	77	14	18%	11
July - Sep 2021	108	38	35%	32
Oct - Dec 2021	81	26	32%	21

	Pre-pandemic
	Pandemic

More and more people have been asking Healthwatch for help to find a dental practice that will take them as an NHS patient

Healthwatch Islington's advice and information service provides signposting and support to residents who need help to access local health, social care and well-being services. The service is available to everyone who lives in Islington or uses services here.

When we see lots of requests for help to access a particular health or care service it can be a good indication that all is not well with that service. Understandably, many more people have contacted us for help to access health and care services during the pandemic. However, we have seen a particular increase in the number of requests we have received for help finding an NHS dentist.

- ▶ Before July 2020 no one had contacted us with a request of this type. The number of requests for help finding an NHS dentist has steadily increased since then until, in the last six months of 2021, this type of enquiry accounted for four out of five of all the dental enquiries we received (53 out of a total of 64 dental cases).
- ▶ Before the pandemic, issues relating to dentistry accounted for, at most, one in ten of the signposting cases we handled. In the last six months, the proportion of cases that relate to dentistry has risen to one in three.
- ▶ Dental enquiries that aren't requests for help finding an NHS dentist tend to be about access (for example emergency treatment, special needs access, or patient choice), entitlements (cost of care/dental charges) or complaints.



Mystery shopping dental practices

In November 2021, Healthwatch volunteers spoke to staff at 19 dental practices in Islington. On one or two occasions the practices were busy and staff were not able to talk for long, but most were able to make time to answer our questions. We wanted to understand whether existing NHS patients received priority over new NHS patients (NHS England has stated that patients are seen based on need, yet practices appear to work with a set list of patients who are already registered with the practice).

- ▶ 18 dental practices told our volunteers that they were able to book NHS appointments right now for their existing registered patients.
- ▶ 9 of these practices said that they were accepting new NHS patients for dental appointments and the other 9 said that they were not accepting new NHS patients.

Experiences of access



Case study one: This resident was not well supported by NHS dental services. Many agencies had to get involved, and many organisations needed to be approached, before she got the care she needed. The hospital carrying out the surgery failing to make a referral for dentures feels like a missed opportunity.

Over the last six months of 2021, we supported a client who was referred to us by her GP, in advance of surgery to have all her teeth removed. Her dentist was unable to offer any aftercare support. The resident had the surgery at the Homerton Hospital and was discharged with little information around mouth care after the surgery and no support or referral to a dentist for follow up care. She had called 16 different dental practices trying to find one willing to give her this care as an NHS patient before Healthwatch got involved.

The patient needed a few weeks' recovery time and we arranged an assessment with a dentist in Hackney. This was the only dentist we could find taking on new patients, there were none in Islington. The dentist was unable to help with the needs of the client, given some complications around bone loss in the gums. We contacted London Dental Confederation for advice on dentists with a denture specialism and were advised to apply to a Dental Teaching School but the client was anxious their denture fitting could take years.

We contacted the Community Dental Service who advised we contact the Eastman Dental Hospital and arranged for the GP to make a referral, which was rejected. A dentist was required to make the referral. The client went back to the dentist outside Islington who made a referral for the client to the Eastman. However, we learned there was a two year waiting list.

We have kept in regular contact with the client and updated the GP around events. This situation has been physically and mentally draining for the client, who is anxious and self-conscious, not able to go out or work, as it impacts their speech and eating.

We contacted the Dental Commissioner who was also contacted by Jeremy Corbyn's office, as the issue was also taken up with the local MP by the client's friend. The original dentist now arranged to see the client in early November and arranged a series of appointments to successfully fit the dentures. The client was pleased to get dentures that suit her and has been given good care by the dentist. Issues around bone loss meant it was a complicated and painful fitting over a number of appointments, as the jaw bone is uneven so the client could only have them in for a hour at a time.

This case has shown the difficulties with the dental treatment pathway following the pandemic. Services are stretched and there have been issues finding dentists taking NHS patients. There is also little provision available for specialist treatment. The options have been opaque and inconsistent.



Case study two: A lack of clarity and consistency in the information we were given on access to urgent dental support for asylum seekers.

The British Red Cross contacted our advice and information service on behalf of an asylum seeker who needed urgent dental treatment. This individual had been asked to pay for their treatment. We provided details of NHS entitlements for asylum seekers and some options around finding a local dentist. We also contacted the Whittington Health Community Dental Service to find out about the support they could offer.

We were told that the Community Dental Service were unable to provide non-urgent treatment for asylum seekers, except in some cases for children where a lack of care might lead to a significant deterioration in oral condition. However, we were assured that they could treat urgent cases.

We conveyed this information and a referral form to the British Red Cross. However, when the referral was made, it was not accepted. We went back to the Community Dental Service who said they were in the process of reviewing their referrals criteria. We checked again by phone and email but did not receive any further clarification about this. This was disappointing as we had sought to give the best advice we could to the British Red Cross supporting an asylum seeker.



Case study three: Helping a resident with complex health needs to find a wheelchair accessible dental practice.

We received a query from a Social Prescribing Link Worker on behalf of a resident with complex health needs who had missed some appointments with his dentist, owing to ill health and mobility issues. The dentist would not keep him on as a patient. The patient had an urgent need for denture care as he was having issues eating and was worried about the choking hazard.

We provided details of NHS guidance which stressed that practices should continue to follow clinical prioritisation, especially for urgent care and priority groups such as children. Our volunteer team had recently conducted a series of calls to all Islington dentists around their availability to take on new NHS patients. From this list, we rang to check on dentists who were taking on patients and were wheelchair accessible.

We found a practice with availability and access and were able to pass on this information, as well as other key details around finding a dentist. The patient was very pleased to be given this option and was able to make an appointment the same week.

Patients who don't already have an NHS dentist have less access to treatment

The tables below shows responses to questions we asked in our online survey on dental access, which ran between September and December 2021. There were 31 respondents.

How did you find a dentist when you needed one?	
I called my usual dental practice	12
I looked it up on the internet	4
I was recommended by a friend or another person	2
There was no available appointment or NHS dentist	12
I called Healthwatch Islington	1

If you were not already registered at a dental practice, did you find a dentist taking NHS patients?	
No	18
Not applicable to me	12
Yes	1

"The current system doesn't protect the patients and it makes them feel worthless. As far as I knew I was registered as an NHS patient at a dentist only to find out I wasn't when I needed it the most (emergency). It is absolutely appalling that the dentists can do whatever they like without being held responsible to anything."

Survey respondent, October 2021

From our conversations with dental practitioners we have heard that not enough NHS dental provision has been commissioned nationally. This means that there is insufficient supply to meet demand. This was already the case before the pandemic, but the pandemic has made that situation much worse.


Patients who are already registered with a dentist have had fewer issues with access. We have seen this in our signposting work. They have often had to wait a long time for an appointment, but they have been prioritised.

As a group, survey respondents who were registered with an NHS dentist gave a much more positive response to the question, 'In the past 18 months, how easy or difficult have you found getting a dental appointment?' than did respondents who weren't registered.

People are less likely to be registered with a dentist if a) they have recently moved to Islington (within the last two years), or b) they have fallen off the system/lost connection with their previous dentist.


In December 2021 the NHS England Director for Dentistry and the Chief Dental Officer for England stated, "Practices should continue to follow clinical prioritisation, especially for urgent care and priority groups such as children. As there is no patient registration within dentistry patients must be prioritised against clinical need and priority groups regardless of whether the member of public is on a practice's business list or not – this is a condition of ongoing financial support."

Our mystery shopping exercise in November 2021 showed that dental practices were following clinical prioritisation for urgent care and priority groups such as children. However, the idea that there is no patient registration within dentistry does not reflect the reality of the patient experience. Many residents have shared their experiences of calling around numerous practices trying to find one that was able to accept them as an NHS patient. These interactions do not appear to have been informed by clinical assessments of need. Rather, the practices have an existing patient cohort and don't have capacity to take on more patients for ongoing NHS care.




Pickering Dental told me I fell off their systems because I didn't go for a few years. So annoying as my kids are there. I had to get private dental treatment.

Respondent who was unable to access urgent NHS treatment, November 2021



There was quite a wait for my father's dentist to re-open after the lockdown and begin to see urgent cases initially, but once he was booked in for routine treatment, things went fairly smoothly.

Survey respondent, December 2021



My [existing] NHS dentist was not undertaking root canal patients and I struggled immensely for the last year and a half to be accepted as a new NHS patient.

Survey respondent, October 2021

Emergency care

Of the 13 survey respondents who needed to access emergency or urgent dental care, 8 said they were able to access it, 2 said they accessed it but not when they needed it, and 3 were unable to access emergency care. Between July and December 2021, our advice and information service offered support to 53 residents who were unable to access NHS dentistry. Many of these residents reported an urgent or emergency need. Cloudesley, an Islington based charitable trust, has made funding available to local residents on low incomes who have not been able to access emergency dental treatment on the NHS and have been forced to pay for private dental care.

Final thoughts

Some residents will value the convenience that the current model of access seems to promise. Unlike your GP practice, you do not need to live within a certain catchment area to go to a particular dental practice. You register at the dentist for a course of treatment and once that is complete it is easy to go to a different dental practice to access other care. This flexibility is good. However, it is important that the relationship doesn't become too transactional. Residents always tell us that they value services that are holistic. Ongoing relationships with trusted professionals who know your medical history are important. This is absolutely the case with dental services, as this survey respondent's comment demonstrates:

"I have been with the same dental surgery as an NHS patient for 40 years. It's in Southwark! I get there on the Overground and then a short(ish) walk, so I will stay with them while I can manage the journey. During COVID precautions, patients had to wait outside till called in for their appointment and thus I met a woman who now lives in Ramsgate but is still registered with the same dental surgery and combines a dental appointment with a day out in London!"

When people enjoy good physical health they do not visit the doctor. When they become ill they can visit their GP and receive appropriate care. Many of us have an expectation that dental services should work in the same way. However, this is not necessarily the case. If a patient does not engage with preventative dentistry (check-ups) they can find that when they do develop a problem and need urgent treatment, their dental practice no longer recognises them as a patient.

During the pandemic in particular, this has meant that patients with high levels of need have found it difficult to access treatment. Giving patients clearer information about the value of dental check-ups (and the possible consequences of not having them, in terms of their ongoing relationship with the dental practice) would be one way of addressing this problem. Dental practices should also make every effort to let patients know when they have been removed from their lists, to give them ample time to make alternative arrangements before their needs become more pressing.

"I wonder if some groups (for example I am pregnant and entitled to free dental care) could be offered NHS appointments on a best effort basis – even if the dentists are very busy."

Survey respondent, October 2021

In the past 18 months, how easy or difficult have you found getting a dental appointment?	
Easy	3
Neither easy nor difficult	4
Difficult	8
Very difficult	13
No answer	3

If you needed emergency or urgent dental treatment were you able to get it?	
Yes	8
Yes, but not when I needed it	2
No, I wasn't	3
No answer/ Not applicable me	18

Our recommendations

1. Dental practices should provide patients with better information about the possibility of no longer being registered for treatment if they do not go for regular check-ups.

If dental practices intend to remove patients from their lists they should make every effort to warn those patients, and to inform patients who have been removed. This would give patients more opportunity to take appropriate action to avoid finding themselves in the unenviable position of needing urgent dental care whilst lacking access to a dentist.

2. There is a need for greater clarity from providers on the eligibility criteria for adult asylum seekers who wish to access Community Dental Services.
3. In Islington, not many dental practices are wheelchair accessible. This needs to be addressed over time.
4. Hospital based dental services need better integration with general dental services, particularly when hospital treatment will necessitate after care from a regular dental practice. It should not be left to the patient to organise the referral for follow up care, particularly in cases where the resident is vulnerable and/or may struggle to be accepted as an NHS patient.
5. Some care home managers we spoke to felt that dental support had become harder to access for their residents. Dentists no longer come into the homes. This makes it harder for residents to access appointments, particularly for those with mobility issues. There are also longstanding difficulties with patient transport services. It was suggested that an "on call dentist who could come in and assess or give appointments to residents who can't easily get out to one" would help with this.

Equality Monitoring

Dental signposting cases – July to December 2021

Gender	
Female	42
Male	18
Prefer not to say	2
No answer	2

Age	
18 to 24	6
25 to 49	14
50 to 64	9
65 to 79	7
Prefer not to say	25
No answer	3

Do you consider yourself to have a disability	
Yes	3
No	19
Prefer not to say	1
No answer	41

Ethnicity	
Asian or Asian British	8
Black or Black British	2
Chinese	1
Mixed	4
White British	13
White other	9
Prefer not to say	24
No answer	3

Online survey respondents

Gender	
Female	22
Male	6
No answer	3

Online survey respondents (continued)

Age	
18 to 24	2
25 to 49	12
50 to 64	6
65 to 79	7
80 +	1
No answer	3

Ethnicity	
Asian or Asian British	2
Black or Black British	1
Chinese	1
Mixed/Other	1
White British	13
White other	10
No answer	3

Do you consider yourself to have a disability	
Yes	11
No	16
Prefer not to say/No answer	4



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