

**Written evidence submitted
by Healthwatch across
Yorkshire and Humber**



**Data related to access to NHS dentistry services during the COVID-19 pandemic
June 2020**

Executive summary

Healthwatch across Yorkshire and the Humber have come together to provide feedback about access to NHS dental care during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many people contacting local Healthwatch, COVID-19 has compounded issues around access to care and treatment, with many Yorkshire residents left without appropriate assistance with their dental health, even in complex and distressing situations.

The feedback in this report has been received from 9 out of 15 Healthwatch across Yorkshire and the Humber. Those Healthwatch are: Bradford, Calderdale, Doncaster, Kingston-Upon-Hull, Kirklees, Leeds, Rotherham, Sheffield and Wakefield.

We believe that NHS dentistry services function in a way that is different from every other part of the NHS. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an acceptance that dental care will be largely unavailable, except in the most extreme circumstances. Whilst there are justifiable reasons why NHS dental care was paused, there are a concerning number of stories about people in significant pain, unable to get appropriate help, and examples of directives that have been given from NHS England, that are not being delivered upon at a local level. As a key local voice organisation, all Healthwatch are involved in the review and reset work for local providers; local health and care organisations are keen to hear the views of people in their communities as they look at what their provision will be going forward. This opportunity has not been made available to local Healthwatch in regards to the return to work for local dentists, and we have not seen any development work that looks at provision of dentistry post-COVID-19. If a GP surgery, local hospital, or community provider were to offer their services in the same way, this would be challenged.

The 9 listed Healthwatch have quickly shared the feedback we have gathered from March - June 2020 regarding dentistry, and this has been pulled together in to the themes below. It would seem from the data received that the issues around dental access have been particularly critical in West Yorkshire and Sheffield, with other areas reporting fewer concerns, and better interaction between their staff and NHS England.

At the end of this document there is a timeline summarising our understanding of how dental care delivery has progressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are hoping that by providing this data, we will achieve the following things:

- 1. Clear information about the availability of dental care**
- 2. Review and reset planning related to access to dental care**
- 3. Review of the impact of limited dental access on health inequalities**

If any further information is needed to clarify elements of this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Helen Hunter at Healthwatch Kirklees on 01924 450379. We would be happy to present our findings by video call if this were necessary.

What key themes have emerged from feedback shared with Healthwatch in Yorkshire and the Humber?

Difficulties with access to urgent dental care

Across several Healthwatch, there are examples of people reaching out for help with urgent dental care issues and struggling to get the care that they need.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, people contacted us when they were experiencing significant dental pain and asked how they could be seen by a dentist. At this time, the only dental care available was telephone support and advice (potentially leading to a prescription of painkillers or antibiotics) and assistance in life threatening emergencies. Whilst this may have been necessary due to infection control and prevention, dental pain can be excruciating and unmanageable without appropriate care and medication. People reported that they couldn't eat, leave the house to exercise, etc... due to the pain they were experiencing.

Telephone support has been well received by some patients who have seen this as a suitable alternative that addressed their needs during the pandemic. Others have struggled to make contact with their dentists for telephone advice; reaching answerphone messages that instruct them to call NHS 111, who then tell them to contact their local dentist directly again.

Some people have reported that they are still struggling to get the urgent care that they need through their dentist, despite the opening of urgent dental care centres, and now, the opening of local dental practices.

There are particular issues for those who are not "registered" with a local dentist. Whilst we know that "registration" is a fallacy, this is now being used as a reason for local dentists to say they cannot see patients with urgent needs, because they are not on the dentist's "list" and they have a backlog of dental work to do with their "registered" patients. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, finding a dentist with an open list, especially in West Yorkshire, was incredibly challenging, and the current set up for providing urgent care does not seem to have done anything to address this challenge.

For those people who cannot get access to urgent dental care but are in extreme pain, they often approach other services seeking resolution to their issue, for example they will call their GP surgery or attend A&E.

Difficulties with the limits to the dental work that can be completed by NHS dentists

There have been reports from the public that the urgent work that is currently being completed by dentists is very basic, and does not allow the opportunity for people to return for follow-up dental care.

Many people are simply being offered an extraction of a decayed tooth, and no alternative options. Reasoning for this is not being clearly explained to patients. Several of these people understand that there are alternative ways to treat their urgent issue, but these are not being offered at this time.

Importance of clear communication about what is available and how to access it

Positive experiences reported to local Healthwatch often focus on the really clear information that has been provided to the individual seeking treatment. There have been a number of stories in which people have said that the telephone information that they received was really helpful, and indicated to them what they needed to do to self-care for their dental issue.

Poor experiences are often focused on a lack of clear communication; examples include out of date answerphone messages, and dentists who don't have clear information themselves.

For some Healthwatch, they have received contact directly from NHS Dental Practices asking if we hold any information about what is happening in terms of access to dental care.

Local Healthwatch experience of getting information from NHS England about dentistry differs significantly by area. In West Yorkshire, very limited information has been made available; simply generic, overarching messages, which do not reflect the reality of the delivery. In South Yorkshire, some Healthwatch have had a far more constructive and informative relationship with their local NHS England contact who has kept them up to date with progress.

Healthwatch is a vehicle through which information can be shared with the public. Each Healthwatch strives to be genuine and upfront about what is available, as this helps us to build trust with our communities. It is very challenging to only have information shared with us that we know does not reflect the reality of the situation.

Paused care and treatment

Some people who have contacted Healthwatch regarding dentistry have done so because they were in the middle of a course of treatment from an NHS dentist that was paused. Some of these individuals are worried about the impact of the pause on the ongoing treatment, but most are concerned about when the treatment will start again. Their needs are not considered to be urgent, so they cannot access the "urgent" treatment that has been made available.

A small number of people have raised questions about accessing routine dental check-ups again, and the availability of routine care, such as use of fluoride varnish on children's teeth. Their concerns are both personal, for example, "Can I be struck off a dentists list because I didn't have a routine appointment for over 12months?" and for the future, about the ongoing dental health of the population.

Concerns about access to appropriate PPE

Personal Protective Equipment has been such a hot topic across the COVID-19 pandemic that it is not surprise to hear people raising questions and concerns around access to PPE for dentists.

The public have shared that they have been told by dentists that they are not delivering care because of limited access to PPE. Healthwatch are aware of some local challenges and debate around who should pay for appropriate PPE for dentists.

Lack of clarity around the reset and recovery planning for NHS Dentistry

It remains unclear what the future holds for NHS Dentistry. Certainly in West Yorkshire, there were some chronic problems around dental access prior to COVID-19, and no information has been made available to Healthwatch about plans to review and reset. Healthwatch hold very valuable information about the public's expectations and could support in the development of a reset plan.

As NHS dentistry is often quite dissociated from other parts of the NHS, and can seem to be far from central to local planning and delivery, we are concerned about this already challenged area of service falling further behind in terms of their return to business.

Additional barriers to accessing urgent dental care for vulnerable groups

The expectation that telephone access to dental practices will be enough for the whole population has meant that some individuals with hearing impairments have not been able to get information and advice about dental self-care.

In terms of delivery challenges, a person with communication challenges due to Autism Spectrum Condition said that the robust PPE meant that they could not understand what they were being told by the dentist delivering their treatment at the urgent care centre. This had created a great deal of anxiety as the individual wasn't sure what their next steps were, and their anxious response led to the dentist behaving in a frustrated way.

What is Healthwatch's understanding of the way NHS Dentistry has been adjusted and delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic?

April 2020

Dental care is only available in life threatening emergencies

- If you have dental pain or an urgent dental problem and you have an NHS dentist - you can call your local dentist and they can offer advice/talk you through what's happening with your tooth/offer pain medication or antibiotics
- If you have dental pain or an urgent dental problem and you don't have an NHS dentist - you call 111 for the same care as is offered by your local dentist
- If you have a critical dental needs, such as uncontrolled bleeding, or an obstruction of the airway - there is scope for you to be seen, but you have to go through NHS 111 even if you have been triaged by your local dentist
- If you have Covid-19 symptoms and critical dental health needs, there is a specialist service with 12 appointments per day available at Leeds Dental Institute (4 appointments reserved for children)

Despite Urgent Care Centres being available in other areas of the country, these were not established in West Yorkshire until the end of April/in to May.

Discussion with a member of a Local Dental Committee in West Yorkshire indicated that dentists had been asked to state whether they would be willing to deliver face to face treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic, but since that point, there had been no further information or assessment, so dentists could not prepare for delivery.

May 2020

Urgent Dental Care centres open

- If you have dental pain or an urgent dental problem and you have an NHS dentist - you can call your local dentist and they can offer advice/talk you through what's happening with your tooth/offer pain medication or antibiotics
- If you have dental pain or an urgent dental problem and you don't have an NHS dentist - you call 111 for the same care as is offered by your local dentist
- If you are deemed to have urgent dental needs, there is scope for you to be seen by an Urgent Dental Care Centre. These are accessible by referral only.
- If you have Covid-19 symptoms and critical dental health needs, there is a specialist service

In West Yorkshire, very basic information was provided about the Urgent Dental Care hubs, and many questions from Healthwatch about the hubs went unanswered. Healthwatch asked how many hubs were available, and what the rough location of these were. We were told that information could not be shared as the location of the hubs should not be publicised. We did not receive any assurance about the number of functioning hubs, or their distribution of those across the patch.

In South Yorkshire, one Healthwatch reported that they had been able to get information about the location of the hubs and the number of these.

In both circumstances, gathering this information was not with the intention of sharing the locations, but simply assuring that, with our local knowledge, we could say whether there were enough and whether they would be simple to get to.

June 2020

Local dentists open to deliver urgent care

- Dental practices will look different as they will be operating in a way that observes COVID-19 social distancing and hygiene rules, as part of measures taken to ensure the safety patients and the dental team alike.
- Whilst we are observing social distancing, patients should continue to telephone or email their practice, rather than attending in person without an appointment.
- If you have a regular dentist, you should call them as a first step. The dentist will assess your situation over the phone, including giving advice and, if needed, prescriptions for painkillers or antibiotics, or arranging treatment.
- If a patient does not have a regular dentist during the COVID-19 outbreak, they can still call any local dental practice as well as visiting 111.nhs.uk or call NHS 111 who will provide advice as appropriate.
- Out of hours for urgent dental issues the advice still remains to visit 111.nhs.uk or call NHS 111. Patients should not be visiting A&E departments or GPs with dental problems.
- The range of treatments offered may be different to that being offered prior to 25 March 2020 and may vary from practice to practice. This will depend on the staff and equipment available to the team at the time. The dental team may also be wearing different protective equipment to what you are used to seeing.

This is the full range of information that has been made available to the public in West Yorkshire. Despite further enquiries from local Healthwatch, there has been no response from NHS England; we have simply been directed to NHS England communications team, as

has one of the South Yorkshire Healthwatch. It remains unclear how many practices are open, how they are accessing PPE, or whether the urgent dental centres are now completely closed.

Local feedback tells us that people are being turned away from practices if they are not a registered patient, and that the range of treatments available is massively reduced.

What we would like to see

There are 3 key adjustments that we would like to see in the delivery of NHS dentistry services at this time.

- 1. Clear information about the availability of dental care** - both local Healthwatch and the general public benefit massively from having a clear understanding of what is happening in terms of access to care. We would like to provide clear, relevant, up to date information about dental access; this is not simply nationally produced messages, but something that truly reflects the local picture.
- 2. Review and reset planning related to access to dental care** - as all elements of the NHS and social care are currently in a review phase, during which they will utilise the views of the public, we would like to see emphasis on this is in the reset of NHS Dentistry. Ongoing issues could be resolved or addressed with smart work through this reset period.
- 3. Review of the impact of limited dental access on health inequalities** - some of our communities with protected characteristics have faced greater challenge in accessing dental care. This has an impact on their overall wellbeing, and could have detrimentally impacted them in comparison to other groups. This needs to be fully understood.

Contact details

Helen Hunter, Chief Executive at Healthwatch Kirklees and Calderdale.

Tel: 01924 450379

Email: helen.hunter@healthwatchkirklees.co.uk.