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**NHS Dentistry Rapid Evidence Review**

**October 2023**

## Introduction

Engaging Communities Solutions CIC are a not-for-profit social research and public engagement company. We currently deliver seven local Healthwatch services in England.

Across the UK access to NHS dentistry has been a long term and arguably increasing issue. This review considers the national picture of access to NHS dental care as well as the work that has been carried out by some of our local Healthwatch in the course of their work on the behalf of the public and patients.

## Methodology

This review was carried out as a short and rapid review of evidence around access to NHS dental services in England. Evidence was gathered through internet searches using the search term 'Access to NHS dentists England'. The search has also brought up information on UK wide access and this has also been included within the review.

The evidence gathered includes reports from other Healthwatch including Healthwatch England, the House of Commons, media articles and reports. Articles and reports have been considered for their relevance and what they would add to the findings. There are multiple different local Healthwatch reports from across England, but we have chosen to include those that best illustrate the access to dentistry in their local areas and have a focus on that area specifically. There is little to no academic literature on the specifics of access to NHS dental care and its impact on patients but there has been some discussion in journals about issues with workforce and recruitment and retention of NHS registered dentists.

## National picture

Access to NHS dentistry has been a long-term issue but since the pandemic it has been found that the situation has considerably worsened. Healthwatch England report that feedback on NHS dental care is the second most

common issue reported and that negative sentiment had increased to 62% in 2002/23 from 55% in 2020/21.<sup>1</sup>

Local Healthwatch across the country have carried out their own research into access to NHS dentistry. Healthwatch Suffolk reported that they had 'near daily contact from people that are finding it difficult to see a local dentist on an NHS footing.'<sup>2</sup> Healthwatch Newcastle and Healthwatch Gateshead reported that there was a lack of appointments in general but particularly for routine check-ups. A report that brought together feedback from Healthwatch in the Southwest of England found that people were having to travel large distances to access NHS dental care, including when practices closed in deprived areas leaving people having to travel 12 miles to the nearest practice and lacking the means to do so<sup>3</sup>. Healthwatch Kent reported that 90% of cases of feedback on dental services related to access to services. They reported difficulties with finding a dentist and issues with being able to afford private treatment when NHS dental care was not available.<sup>4</sup> They also reported long waits for appointments. Healthwatch Dorset reported that there were no dental practices taking on new NHS adult patients out of the 93 dental practices in Dorset. 18 practices were accepting new NHS patients if they were children and seven were accepting NHS patients with additional needs.<sup>5</sup> Lincolnshire has been identified as the area with the least NHS dental provision per 100,000 of the population by the Association of Dental Groups and Healthwatch Lincolnshire reported that whilst everyone was struggling with access to NHS dental care, children, people who were pregnant and people with disabilities were finding it especially difficult to access care. They found that people were routinely having to travel to other counties to access dental care including one case where a family were travelling to Bedford to access dental care after having moved to Lincolnshire.

6

There have been numerous surveys and media reports since the pandemic that have found worsening access to NHS dentistry including work by the BBC

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<sup>1</sup> [New report calls for fundamental reform of NHS dental care | Healthwatch](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/news/dentalcrisis/>

<sup>3</sup> [Dentistry data for local Healthwatch in the South West – July 2023 | Healthwatch Data](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Primary care: what people have told us about dentistry | Healthwatch Data](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Why are people finding it difficult to access NHS dental care in Dorset? | Healthwatch Data](#)

<sup>6</sup> [HWL Dental Campaign Findings So Far .pdf \(healthwatchlincolnshire.co.uk\)](#)

in 2022 that contacted 6880 NHS dentists in England to see if they were accepting new patients. They found that 9 out of 10 dental practices were not accepting new NHS patients and that in a third of local authority areas they found no dentists that were taking on NHS patients.<sup>7</sup>

The House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee stated that ‘we believe there is a crisis of access in NHS dentistry. Many people are unable to access an NHS dentist or are travelling significant distances to get one. Access varies across the country and is being experienced differently by different groups.’<sup>8</sup>

The inability to access dental care is putting additional pressure on to primary care with people turning to their GP when unable to access dental care.<sup>9</sup>

The Association of Dental Groups<sup>10</sup> found in their 2022 report that there were dental service deserts in England naming the top ten, then CCGs, with the lowest numbers of registered NHS dentists per 100,000 of the population. Halton and Stoke-on-Trent, areas where Healthwatch contracts are delivered by ECS, were in the top ten at eight and nine respectively.

It is reported that dentists are leaving the NHS at a rate of around 2,000 per year and the ADG estimates that each loss of a dentist leaves around 2,000 people without access to a dentist, meaning around 4 million people a year have lost access to an NHS dentist. Dental Choices state on their website that ‘the NHS has already lost 3,000 dentists and that three quarters of NHS dentists say that they are now likely to reduce (or further reduce) their NHS commitment in the next 12 months.’<sup>11</sup> The British dental Association found that one in four adults have an unmet need for dental care. Over half of dentists had reduced their NHS capacity and 74% said that they planned on further reducing their NHS work.<sup>12</sup> Issues around recruitment and retention of dentists has been discussed in the British Dental Journal<sup>13</sup> with an acknowledgement

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<sup>7</sup> [Full extent of NHS dentistry shortage revealed by far-reaching BBC research - BBC News](#)

<sup>8</sup> [NHS dentistry \(parliament.uk\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [The dentistry crisis “lapping at the doors of primary care” | The BMJ](#)

<sup>10</sup> [ADG-Report The-urgent-need-to-level-up-access April-2022 V3.pdf \(usercontent.one\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> <https://dentalchoices.org/improve-access-nhs-dentistry>

<sup>12</sup> [Press releases Half of dentists have cut back NHS work, with more to follow as crisis mounts \(bda.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [The dental workforce recruitment and retention crisis in the UK | British Dental Journal \(nature.com\)](#)

that there is a growing crisis and that some areas are being particularly impacted including rural areas but increasingly in urban areas and cities.

The way that NHS dentistry is commissioned and funded are seen as key reasons for the number of dentists leaving the NHS<sup>14</sup>. There have been changes made to the value of treatment prices by government in July 2022 but whilst welcomed by providers, they are not seen as being sufficient to arrest the loss of dentists let alone turnaround the lack of access<sup>1516</sup>. The House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee found that 'dental contracts hold back desired transformation- in simple terms the amount of funding received does not incentivise dentists to take on complex cases, or patients with ongoing oral health issues.' Dental Choices, on their website state that 'currently only 14% of the 6603 NHS dental practices in England and the Isle of Wight have enough funding and capacity to accept new patients.' They go on to state that 'NHS dentistry is limited by design' and that it limits the number of contracts and in turn the number of treatments available through the NHS.

Contracting of NHS dentists was carried out by NHS England until April 2023 when the responsibility passed over to Integrated Care Boards and 'by the end of July 2024 every ICB should have undertaken an oral health needs assessment in consultation with service users, patient organisations and the profession.'<sup>17</sup>

### Local Healthwatch delivered by ECS.

As access to NHS dental care is a recognised national issue, unsurprisingly local Healthwatch delivered by ECS have either undertaken projects in relation to dentistry or are currently carrying out work as part of their annual work plans.

### Healthwatch Halton

In March 2022,<sup>18</sup> there were no dental practices taking on any new NHS patients whether they were adults or children in Halton. Healthwatch Halton

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<sup>14</sup> [The dental workforce recruitment and retention crisis in the UK | British Dental Journal \(nature.com\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [The dental workforce recruitment and retention crisis in the UK | British Dental Journal \(nature.com\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> [College response to NHS England announcement of additional dentistry funding – College of General Dentistry \(cgdent.uk\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [NHS dentistry \(parliament.uk\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [The Big Dental Check Up March 2022.pdf \(healthwatchhalton.co.uk\)](#)

found at that point that 58% of the people who responded to their survey were registered with an NHS dentist; 11% were with a private dentist and 31% were not registered with any dentist. A number of people reported that they have been registered with an NHS dentist prior to the pandemic but that they had been taken off the dentists lists because they had not attended for some time, usually because they had not been able to attend when dentists were closed during the pandemic. 43% of people said that they had been unable to book a routine appointment with a dentist. Healthwatch Halton found from people responding to their survey in 2021 that the information on dental practices on the NHS Choices was out of date and people needed to ring around practices to see whether they were taking on NHS patients.

Healthwatch Halton carried out a further project in late 2022 to update the information that they had found in their previous work. They found that not much had improved in the availability of NHS dental services. When asked about the ease of booking an appointment 20% of survey respondents said that it was difficult or very difficult and a further 32% said that it was impossible to book an appointment and they had been unable to do so. Just under 38% of respondents to the survey had not seen a dentist in the last two years. For some that had been able to get appointments, they commented that they were having to travel further afield to access any dental care with trips of a hundred-mile round trip and 60 miles being mentioned in the feedback.<sup>19</sup>

### Health Stoke-on-Trent

Healthwatch Stoke-on-Trent undertook a project looking at access to dentistry in 2022.<sup>20</sup> They found that 62.5% of the people who responded to the survey had been unable to access NHS dental treatment in the previous two years. 73% of respondents said that they had found it hard or very hard to book an appointment for NHS dental treatment. It was also found that 22% of respondents to the survey were put off from attending the dentist because of the charges for NHS treatment, although 64% said that it did not put them off attending the dentist.

In common with the experiences of people living in Halton, people in Stoke-on-Trent reported that they had found themselves de-registered by the

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<sup>19</sup> [Microsoft Word - Dental update report 211222.docx \(healthwatchhalton.co.uk\)](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Guidance \(healthwatchstokeontrent.co.uk\)](#)

dental practice they had previously attended when they tried to book a new appointment. They also reported that the NHS website to find a dentist was not accurate and so they had to phone around dental practices.

### Healthwatch Sandwell

Healthwatch Sandwell carried out a project looking at access to dental services in 2022.<sup>21</sup> They carried out checks with dental practices to see if they were taking on new NHS patients. 84% or 38 practices were not taking on new NHS patients in Sandwell.

There was evidence that even for existing patients there was difficulty booking routine appointments with some practices operating a waiting list and there being a 2-3 week wait for appointments in some cases.

When asked if people could make an emergency appointment, 93% of the dental practices said that people could but, in most cases, they needed to be an existing patient.

### Ongoing work

Healthwatch Bedford Borough and Healthwatch Walsall are both currently undertaking research projects into access to NHS dental care in their local areas and their findings will be published in due course.

### Conclusion

The findings from the work that has been carried out by the local Healthwatch delivered by ECS, largely supports the findings of the wider Healthwatch network and reports from other bodies and the media. Not all of the local Healthwatch delivered by ECS have undertaken projects on general access to NHS dentistry. We have found that people are struggling to find an NHS dental practice that is taking on new NHS patients and this is the case across the country to a greater or lesser degree. Our local Healthwatch have found their areas to be affected at different levels, but all are seeing people struggling with access.

Access to NHS dental care has been an issue for a number of years, with dentists suggesting that the contracts that were out in place in 2006 have

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<sup>21</sup> [Access-to-dentists-in-Sandwell-March-2022.pdf \(healthwatchesandwell.co.uk\)](#)

contributed to the decline of NHS dentist availability. However, during the Pandemic and since then, the problems with access have been particularly acute. There is a recruitment and retention problem in the NHS dentistry workforce and the government have promised a new workforce plan for NHS dentistry that has yet to be published despite being announced over 12 months ago. NHS contracts for dentists have been altered a little and it has been welcomed by the industry, it is still felt that there needs to be a major change on the way that NHS dentistry is commissioned, and the values of those contracts increased to encourage more dentists to provide enough NHS dentistry.





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