

## Dental queries received by Healthwatch Cheshire during the COVID-19 pandemic



As part of our statutory role, Healthwatch Cheshire gather the views of local people on health, care and wellbeing. We feed back people's experiences to decision makers so that they can use people's opinions to plan, shape and improve local health and care services. More about our work can be found at [www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk) and [www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk).

Since June 2020, Healthwatch Cheshire (HWC) has received increasing numbers of calls asking for details of local dental practices taking on new NHS patients. This is being experienced across Cheshire; however, we have received many enquiries from the Northwich and Winsford areas in particular. The main issues raised by people in regards to dentistry are summarised in this report.

### Inaccurate information on NHS website

Details of dental practices on the NHS Services website are in many cases out of date, meaning that people needing treatment are forced to phone around individual practices to enquire about registering. People are also being directed to Healthwatch by the NHS Services website which says that Local Healthwatch may be able to provide information about dentists taking on NHS patients. Comments have included:



- *“Unable to get a dentist, looked on website and phoned all in area. Phoned NHS111 who told me that Healthwatch could find me a dentist.”*
- *“I urgently need dental treatment which I cannot afford to pay for privately, I’ve contacted numerous dentists in the area but none are taking on NHS patients, would you be able to point me in the direction of a dentists in the south Cheshire/Stoke-on-Trent area that is currently accepting new adult NHS patients?”*



## Lack of NHS appointments/treatment

Of the dental queries we receive, an increasing number are from people who have been put in touch with an emergency dentist, perhaps via the Cheshire and Merseyside Emergency Dental Helpline, and the issue has been patched up rather than resolved unless they pay for private treatment. Feedback has included:



- *“I’m hoping you can help me; I have been struggling to find an NHS dentist which is accepting new patients for nearly 2 months. I’ve looked in several towns in Cheshire East (I live in Sandbach but work in Macclesfield and Crewe) but to no avail and my tooth is getting worse. I saw an emergency dentist as I ended up with an abscess but as tooth still hasn’t been fixed it’s started to flare up again and I need to sort the problem not just get more antibiotics as just going round in circles.”*
- *“Woman had been through NHS 111 and the Cheshire & Merseyside Emergency dental helpline who organised an appointment with a dentist who had x-rayed her, given her antibiotics and then suggested that she needed a tooth pulled. She has telephoned around the dentists in Northwich and those who take on NHS patients said they had no room on their list to treat her. She could find plenty of private dentists who would do the treatment. She had booked to see someone who wanted £150.00 for the extraction then suggested she would need dental implants etc costing hundreds. The woman is retired and receives housing benefits and cannot afford these charges. She wanted to know who regulates the private dentists.”*



## Convenience of access

Some people register with dentists in other counties, some are offered appointments in 5 or so months’ time, some are told there is no waiting list and to keep calling back.



- *“I’ve recently moved to Knutsford; the House Manager tells me that there are no NHS dentists in Knutsford. Can you please confirm if that’s the case, and if so, suggest where my next best bet is? I’ve taken good care of my teeth all my life. Please help me to continue doing so. It’s 18 months since I had a check-up, which has never happened in my life before. I’m a widow with no access to a car since my husband died, so I’d need to rely on public transport.”*
- *“I am having trouble finding a dentist anywhere near where I live, even within 10 -15 miles, that is taking on NHS patients. I’ve telephoned them as they*

*haven't updated their information on the NHS website but I need treatment. It's disgusting to think as an NHS patient you have to pay for dentistry?"*

- *"My family and I have recently moved to a new area (SK10) and have been unable to find a dental surgery that is accepting NHS patients. As the town I live in is quite small I accept that I may have to travel a short distance to access services or may have to wait a short time on a waiting list. Instead, I have been repeatedly informed that my family and I cannot be added to any waiting list and, when I rang and spoke to someone at NHS England yesterday, I was told that the nearest available dentist was located roughly 11 miles from my home, not only in another town but in another county. The journey to this dental surgery on public transport from my home would take around 80 minutes. Please let know if you have any advice on how I might find something more suitable in my local area."*

## Cheshire & Merseyside Dental Helpline

We have also signposted people to the Cheshire & Merseyside Emergency Dental Helpline which deals with emergency dental enquiries for people who are not currently registered with a dentist in the area. Increasingly we are finding that the Helpline is unable to provide assistance for people.



- *The phone number you gave me is the one I've been ringing for a week and still no appointments. Perhaps someone could explain to me why it's called an emergency treatment line, yet there is no urgency or indeed appointments? It's supposed to be a 'triage' help line, absolute joke."*
- *"The situation is ridiculous; I've not eaten or slept properly for over a week now. I've just been swallowing copious amounts of Paracetamol and Ibuprofen. I've complained to my elected MP, she didn't even have the decency to reply. So, I've drafted a letter to Boris, explaining my experience at what would appear to be a 3<sup>rd</sup> world standard of dentistry here in the UK. I've suggested he examines the terms, 'Emergency and Help' because the terms don't seem to mean anything anymore. NHS111, couldn't get rid of me fast enough, just spouting quote 'Look on the Internet!'"*
- *"I've given in, holding on telephone lines for more than 90 minutes, only to be told, ring tomorrow. Question - When is tomorrow today?"*



## Unable to access due to inactivity

There appears to be confusion around people being registered with dentists, and it is clear that further and better communication is needed around this process to the public. Some enquiries come from people new to the area or studying locally. Others are from people who have been unable to get an appointment with their dentist' due to lack of recent attendance.



- *“I have been kicked off the list at my dentist because I haven't been there for a while, they have denied me treatment due to backlogs of emergencies due to Covid lockdowns. The receptionist said I was to ring back next year in January to re-register and then they would see about me booking an appointment because they simply don't have the slots and available dentists - I understand this is a widespread issue - stop underfunding the NHS dentists and then there will be dentists available to deal with demand.”*
- *“My son has been removed from the registered patients list at his dentist, as he has not been for 18 months. They have said that they will not put him back on the list until after Covid. His dental issue has gone from intermittent to persistent now. A staff member at Healthwatch Cheshire gave me further advice on where to locate dentists in my area, but this now means I have to call so many dentists with no guarantee they are taking on NHS patients. I have a number for the Cheshire and Merseyside dental helpline to call.”*

## 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:

[www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk)

[www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk)

We share all comments and feedback with the individual dental providers, and also NHS England who commission dentistry services. We have started to hold regular meetings with the NHS England dentistry team in the North West, to raise the concerns shared with us by the public, including in this report. NHS England are fully aware of the concerns, and have explained the circumstances as to why some of them occur, helping us to better understand the system. They are currently working towards resolving these issues and we will continue to work together using regular meetings 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.

Healthwatch Cheshire are meeting with NHS England dentistry leads to discuss the issues raised by people.

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

Email: [info@healthwatchcheshire.org.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchcheshire.org.uk)

Telephone: 0300 323 0006

