

NHS dental access report as at 8/3/21

As the pandemic has progressed, we have received an increased number of requests for help in finding an NHS dentist, and also feedback about the problems people have encountered. Our COVID survey included many brief comments.

This short report summarises what we have been told since the beginning of lockdown in March 2020 up to 8 March 2021.

Type of contact	Number of people
Signposting following phone, email, or website contact	41
Story	4
Healthwatch Tameside surveys	55
Healthwatch England feedback form	3
Complaint	1

In addition to these numbers, four of the people from the signposting data rang us on more than one occasion, several weeks or months apart. They had still not been successful in finding an NHS dentist. One person who completed the feedback form on the Healthwatch England website did so twice, a week apart, with updated information.

Cancellation of appointments

24 people told us about cancellations of appointments at the start of lockdown, including a few being left mid-treatment. 21 people did not make any other comment. It is possible some of these appointments were for routine check-ups.

People who had treatment booked included:

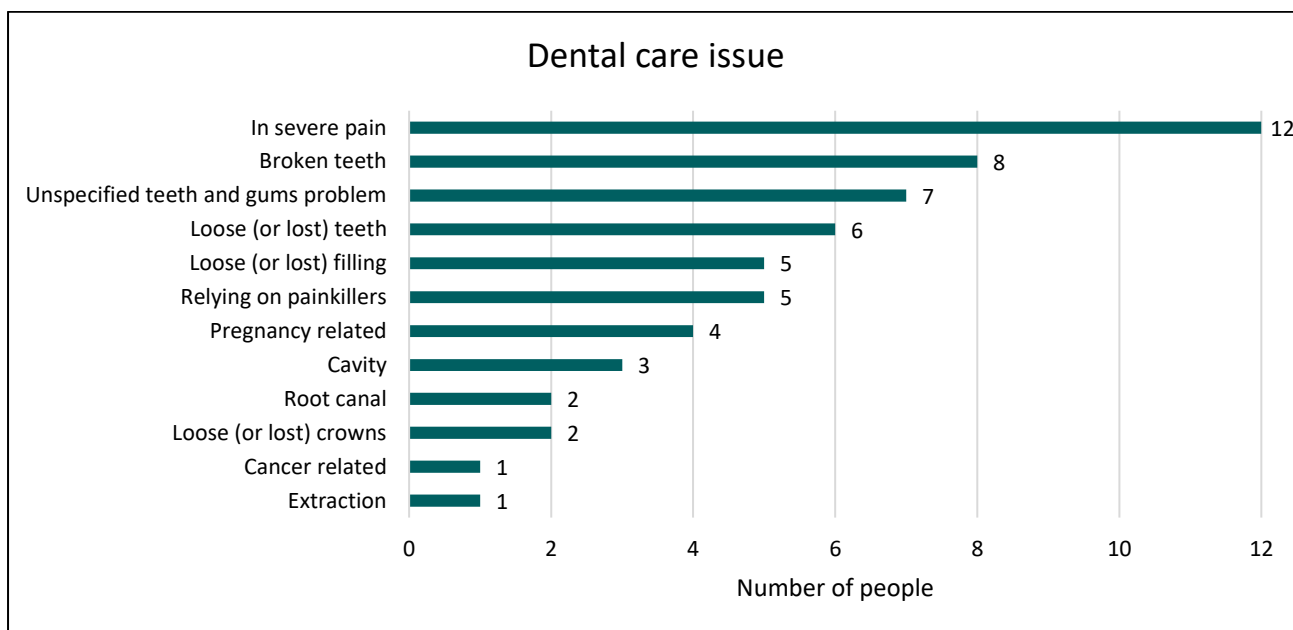
- Emergency root canal treatment- had already waited 5 months for the appointment.
- Care for loose teeth and dental hygienist.
- Started unspecified treatment in February. No help offered after appointments cancelled. Taking painkillers.

Access to NHS dentists during the pandemic

60 people said they were unable to find a dentist who would provide NHS treatment. Of these 24 are since our last report in November 2020 and have come via our signposting/information function.

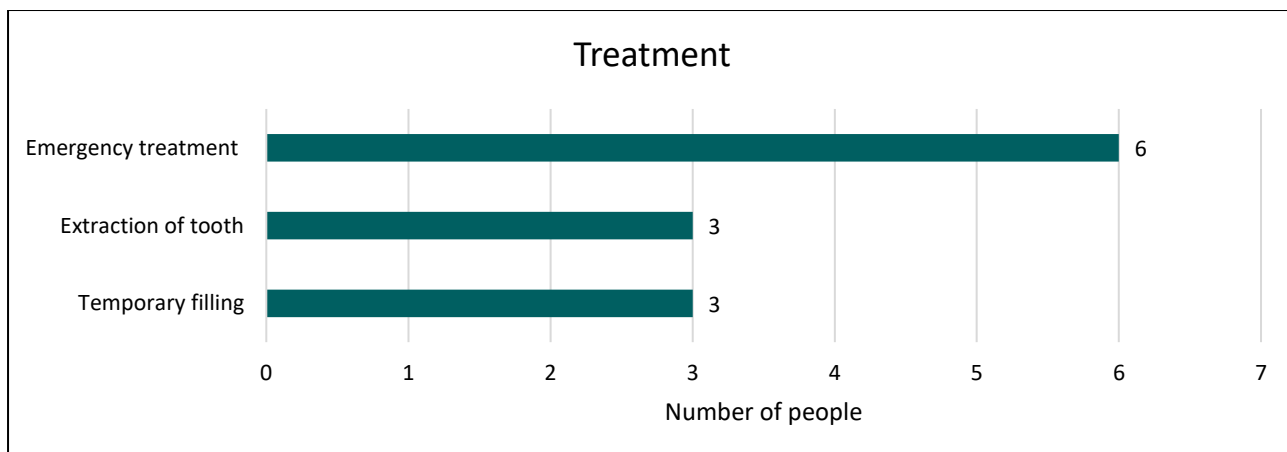
During the first lockdown, dentists were closed, and emergency treatment was only available via the emergency telephone number. Each case was triaged, but the criteria for eligibility for treatment was extremely strict. Being in extreme pain and unable to eat or sleep were not considered severe enough, regardless of the length of time suffering. People who were eligible received the minimum treatment possible to relieve the pain. Some were told to find a dentist to complete the treatment, which they could not do.

Here is a breakdown of the types of problems people wanted to get treatment for.



As dentists started to re-open, they had a large backlog of patients waiting for appointments. Some people said they were offered private care but could not afford to pay. Some people were asked to pay for PPE. Most of the feedback we have received has been after the dentists were told they could re-open. Many people are still unable to access care. Dentists are not taking on new patients whilst they have so many existing patients waiting for care.

Here is a summary of the treatments people say they have been offered.



Some of the more detailed feedback we have received (which we have summarised) includes:

- People who have an existing relationship with a dental practice:
 - Been trying to see a dentist all year. Now pregnant and unable to get the recommended check-up.
 - Dentist had incorrect contact details. When unable to contact patient, they were removed from the list. After having a brace removed at the orthodontist, a cavity was found in a tooth. Patient contacted dentist and discovered what had happened, but the dentist refused to re-add them to the practice's patient database or offer them an appointment.
 - Dentist shut and need a tooth out.
 - Dentist will only do fillings if toothache.
 - Existing dentist closed down. Unable to find another.
 - Existing dentist refused to treat toothache and swollen gums as an NHS patient because there was no bleeding or facial swelling. The person is on Universal Credit and cannot afford to pay privately.
 - Had a broken tooth and missing filling in March. Was given a temporary filling and a long wait through lockdown. Not happy about having to pay for PPE.
 - Had a check-up in February or March. Dentist has changed owners. He used to be treated as an NHS patient. They did the check up as a private patient. A couple of weeks later a tooth came off his palette whilst eating an apple. He spoke to them but they weren't providing care at that time, and they wanted to charge him as a private patient and was offered a dental plan. He now wants to get care as an NHS patient. He thinks 90% of their patients are now private.
 - Have needed treatment for a few weeks, and in pain. Hope to soon be able to get treatment.
 - Person wants to complain because "the NHS dentist is only extracting teeth and not considering other options." The dentist said they are doing their best with the money the NHS pay.
 - Person with maternity exemption certificate expiring in January 2021 - had to wait for care, then given temporary fillings. Hopes to have proper treatment before end of October.
 - Rang dentist's practice - "useless, totally unhelpful as whole profession in hiding".
 - Spoke to dentist who said to wait in pain.
 - The dentist only wants to extract teeth and will not offer any other treatment. Has an abscess behind front tooth which the dentist wants to extract. He does not want this.
 - Tooth broke exposing nerve. Painkillers not easing pain. Over a period of weeks tried to get help. Unable to sleep, eat or drink due to pain. Discovered pregnant, so worried about health of baby when not eating or drinking. Existing dentist tried to get emergency tooth extraction but rejected twice. Person tried ringing 111, attended A & E, rang NHS England, and rang the Tameside emergency number (but not eligible because has a

- dentist). Healthwatch got in touch with their contact at NHS England who agreed to look into it, but in the meantime the patient rang the emergency number again and said they did not have a dentist. The tooth was removed several weeks after it broke in an emergency appointment.
- Two loose teeth, one bleeding. Have a palette with several teeth on which no longer fits because of the loose teeth. Phoned dentist who refused appointment and very rude. Said they had no PPE and I had no pain. How did they know? “Feel it’s because I’m elderly”.
 - Veneer came off, piece of tooth broken and decay. Dentist closed since March.
- People without a dentist:
 - Emergency appointment - temporary filling and antibiotics, they told me I had a few teeth which required action and I should find a dentist. I am unable to eat on one side of my mouth.
 - Emergency dental treatment and a temporary filling. The dentist said I needed a root canal so I need to find an NHS dentist (2 people).
 - Has been a patient for over 20 years. She contacted them to make appointment to be told that as she has not attended the surgery in the last year she has been removed from their list. She last attended late 2019. She thought that she had not been receiving appointments due to C-19. The response was that she had been removed from their list and that she needs to find a new dentist.
 - Has been trying to find an NHS Dentist as she has broken her front tooth. It is causing pain and she has difficulty eating.
 - Have 2 broken teeth - been trying to find a dentist for a year.
 - I have a cracked front tooth that is affecting my speech and I am told a crown will need to be placed on my tooth and the dentist I contacted estimated I am probably band 3, which is more than I can afford.
 - I have urgently needed one since February however COVID has made it extremely difficult and I have a really bad phobia.
 - I'm trying to get an NHS dentist for an urgent extraction that I think may need to be done under sedation - it's a wisdom tooth.
 - Lost crown just after lockdown and can't get a dentist anywhere.
 - Person was given emergency appointment in Rochdale which the dentist rejected. Healthwatch was contacted several times for assistance, during the weeks it took to resolve this.
 - Received emergency treatment and told to find a dentist for teeth extractions. Has been unable to do so.
 - The Christy have said needs to be seen by a dentist as Chemo and Radio (rubian 223) are part of treatment. With Rhuian 223 there can be no cracks in the teeth. They rang his dentist for a check-up - told that has been removed from their list as has not attended in the last 12 months.
 - Two missing fillings have turned to cracked teeth during lockdown. Tried ringing 111 but there is no abscess and is taking painkillers so no help available.
 - Unable to find a dentist and now have no upper teeth.

Positive comments

Since the first report, dentists have started seeing some patients, although many people can still not find an NHS dentist willing to accept a new patient. However, many of these people are being offered private care. Cost is a barrier to many people.

Here are some of the comments, although we do not know whether people attended as NHS or private patients:

- Always helpful, attentive and personal 10/10.
- Feeling safe at the dentist.
- Felt safe because clear covid policies and procedures were being followed.
- I had no trouble seeing a dentist for emergency treatment (2 people).
- I have accessed dental services which has been excellent.
- Not crowded at all, booked appointment's and there was plenty of space to distance from others. On arrival they asked me at the door if I had covid symptoms and checked my temperature.
- Phoned by service and invited to attend for a check-up which had been delayed, due to the pandemic.
- The Dentist was extremely good at ensuring safety in spacing, protective clothing and hygiene, couldn't fault them and felt totally safe.

Actions by Healthwatch Tameside

1. Healthwatch raised concerns at the August meeting of the Quality Performance and Assurance Group (QPAG). The Director of Quality and Safeguarding said they would raise the matter at Greater Manchester meetings.

Healthwatch highlighted and updated on the issues at the September and October meetings of the Primary Care Delivery and Improvement Group (PCDIG). The Head of Primary Care said they would raise at Greater Manchester meetings.

2. At the end of September, Healthwatch rang every dentist in Tameside. Most said they were not accepting new NHS patients. The exceptions were:
 - a. One dentist offered registration on their database but would be unable to see anyone new before April/May 2021.
 - b. One dentist said they would see children on the NHS.

This exercise was repeated in February. In Tameside, apart from a couple who may be prepared to see children on the NHS, there were no dentists accepting new adult NHS patients.

Outside Tameside, one dentist said they were accepting NHS patients, but the person we passed on this information to said that the reviews were not good, and they would not be contacting them.

Three dental practices said they could accept private patients.

3. Healthwatch Manchester were showing dentists with availability on their website. In early October Healthwatch Tameside rang each of these, and the responses were:
 - a. One dentist said to try again in November 2020.
 - b. One dentist said to try again in January 2021.
 - c. One dentist said to try again in spring 2021.
 - d. One dentist said a waiting list could be joined.
4. Monthly reports are produced for commissioners and providers. The dentistry information is sent to the Quality lead at Tameside and Glossop Clinical Commissioning Group (the CCG), NHS England in Manchester and the Care Quality Commission (the CQC).
5. Since September, the emails to NHS England have requested information about what is happening with NHS dental care, due to our concerns.
6. Healthwatch England are collating data at a national level, as this is a national issue. Healthwatch Tameside have provided any information requested, to add to this overall picture.

NHS website information

This website explains how to find an NHS dentist <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/dentists/how-to-find-an-nhs-dentist/>

It states:

There is no need to register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP because you are not bound to a catchment area. Simply find a dental surgery that's convenient for you, whether it's near your home or work, and phone them to see if there are any appointments available.

Dental surgeries will not always have the capacity to take on new NHS patients - you may have to join a waiting list, look for a different dentist who is taking on new NHS patients, or be seen privately.

Once you find a dental surgery, you may have to fill in a registration form at your first visit, which is just to add you to their patient database. However, that does not mean you have guaranteed access to an NHS dental appointment in the future.

The website also explains what to do if you can't find a dentist, how to look for urgent dental care, when to visit A & E, and provides information about NHS dental charges.