

An insight into accessing NHS dentistry in Camden during COVID-19

June 2021

Background

COVID-19 has created challenges for patients and service providers alike. We know that Camden's dentists have been working around the clock to support patients in need during the pandemic.

In a recent Healthwatch Camden blog ([How do NHS dental services work?](#)), a local dentist explains how the COVID-19 pandemic is limiting the number of patients that can be seen in one day due to social distancing measures, increased 'fallow' time in between patients, and other restrictions. Over COVID-19, the NHS set reduced targets for dental practices to deliver approximately 36-45%¹ of their pre-pandemic activity. According to new NHS guidance, as of 01 April 2021, practices must now deliver 60% of pre-pandemic activity².

Healthwatch England recently published a [report](#) highlighting issues with dental access across the UK, which closely aligns with what we have been hearing from residents in Camden. It is in this context that Healthwatch Camden decided to gather evidence on the current picture on access to dentistry in Camden.

What we did

Healthwatch Camden called all 33 dental practices with NHS contracts in Camden and asked them a series of questions about their availability. We spoke to a variety of dental practice staff members including reception staff, practice managers, and dentists. The amount of NHS activity contracted to deliver varied by dental practice.

All calls were made between 12th and 28th of May during office hours. The findings below provide a snapshot of the situation in Camden during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

Most 'existing' patients able to schedule appointments with their dentist

Unlike GP practices, which have specified catchment areas and patient registration lists, NHS patients can technically go to any dental practice that has an NHS contract and they do not need to formally register³. However, we found that most local dental practices have a mechanism for distinguishing between 'new' and 'existing' NHS patients, and existing patients had greater access when scheduling appointments.

The definition of 'existing patient' varied across practices. In some cases, it meant if a patient was *currently* receiving treatment at that practice. In other cases, if a patient had attended the practice within the last 1-3 years or were on a treatment waiting list pre-

¹ 22 December 2020. [NHS Dental Contract Arrangements Letter for Q4](#)

² 29 March 2021. [NHS England Dental Contract Reform and Arrangements](#)

³ <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/how-to-find-an-nhs-dentist/>

COVID they were considered existing. Other practices simply said they keep patient lists and did not further explain.

- The majority of dental practices were scheduling appointments for existing NHS patients, with an additional 6 practices who were able to offer some limited care or pain relief to these patients. Taken together, this suggests that 4 in 5 dental practices can offer at least some provision to those NHS patients they considered existing.
- However, a minority of practices (4 out of 33) were unable to offer any NHS appointments for existing NHS patients, or did not keep patient lists and therefore treated all NHS patients the same.

Nearly all Camden dentists were unable to accept new NHS patients

- Only one dental practice (out of 33) in Camden was currently taking on 'new' NHS patients. However, this one practice only had an NHS contract for students, not the general public.
- Reasons cited for not scheduling new NHS patients were: being at full capacity, having too long of waiting lists, and experiencing a backlog from the pandemic.

"We have zero capacity. We stopped taking new NHS patients a month ago. We stayed open during the pandemic because we quickly put everything in place and had PPE so everyone came to us and now we are overbooked. We can't even see our own patients because we are so overbooked, it's dreadful". - dental staff

- One practice said that they have a 'small NHS contract' and get 50 calls per day asking if they are taking on new NHS patients, of which they unfortunately have to decline.

New patients can expect a 3 month wait to see an NHS dentist

Twenty practices were able to anticipate when they would begin taking new NHS patients ('new' defined in most cases as a patient who has never attended the practice or has not attended recently).

There was a minimum of 3 weeks and a maximum of 6 months waiting time to be allowed to register and book an appointment, depending on the practice and their availability⁴. The average wait time across all practices was 3 months.

A further 9 practices were unable to specify a waiting time and responses ranged from "don't know," "no guarantee," and "not any time soon."

"We can't say yet, but not any time soon."

"Can't really provide a waiting time as currently backlogged due to lockdown. We will review beginning of June but no guarantees."

⁴ Where the waiting time was expressed in a range, the mid-point was chosen to provide a waiting time

"For new NHS, our dentist is operating at 60% capacity right now and the system is underfunded and over stretched, it's not going to get better it's going to get worse. Our hands are tied. The 60% capacity rule will be re-evaluated in June."

Waiting times for existing NHS patients to book an appointment varied significantly across practices. Some said they could see existing patients within a week while others said it would be 2-3 weeks and one said existing patients have to wait two months to be seen.

Some exceptions made for emergency care

- A third of dentists were taking on new NHS patients for emergencies.
- Six practices were only scheduling emergency appointments for existing NHS patients (not new NHS patients).
- Just under half were not taking on any NHS patients even in an emergency.
- There is some evidence that the completeness of that care could vary. One respondent stated: *"if it's an emergency we will get them in for antibiotics or pain relief, but we can't give them an examination until mid-end June"*.
- Of those practices that were taking on new NHS patients in emergencies, most said that they would offer patients a one-off emergency appointment but not keep them on as existing patients.
- Many of those who were not taking NHS patients for emergencies said that they would suggest patients pay privately in an emergency.

One in three practices were unable to offer any appointments to children on the NHS

Figure 1. NHS Dental Access for children

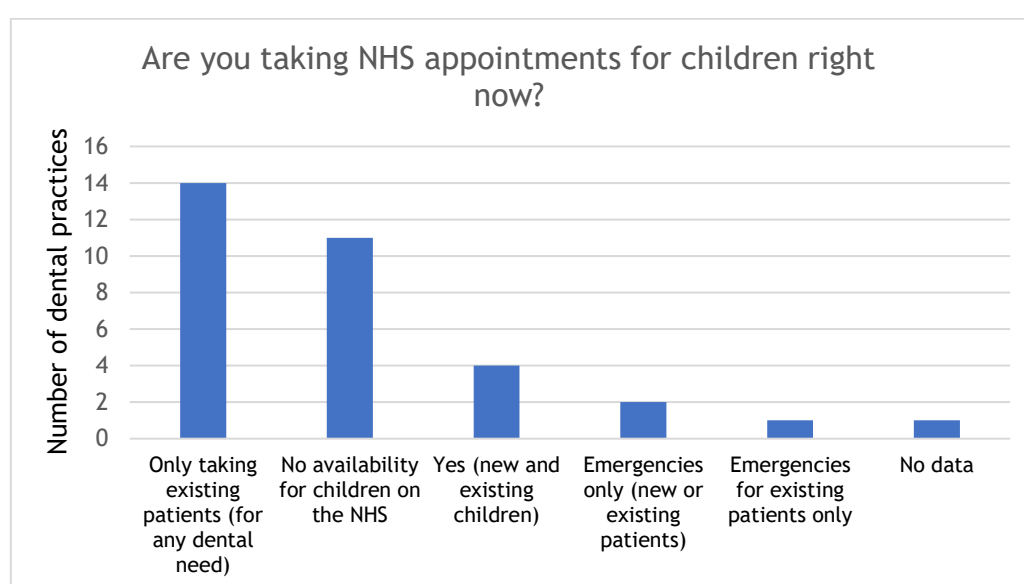


Figure 1 shows that of the 33 Camden Dental practices with NHS contracts:

- Four practices were able to offer appointments for any NHS children (both new *and* existing patients) for their dental needs.
- Fourteen practices were only able to offer appointments to children who were considered existing patients with the practice, even though all children up to the age of 18 are eligible for free dental care on the NHS.
- One in three (11) practices were *unable* to offer any appointments to children on the NHS (whether an existing or new patient).
- Three practices were only able to see children in an emergency (one of which could only see existing child patients).

Ample availability of private dental appointments

Despite the lack of NHS appointments, almost two-thirds (21 out of 33) of practices did have availability for private appointments. In other words, if a patient could pay privately then they were much more likely to be able to find a practice nearby who could take care of their dentistry needs.

Some practices could offer private appointments as soon as the next day while other practices said the wait would be 1-2 weeks and one practice said there was a 2 month wait even for a private patient. Patients who could pay privately also benefitted from other perks. For example, one practice said that they reserve cancellations (whether originally NHS appointments or not) for private patients only.

Each dental practice is contracted to deliver a different amount of NHS dental care, some more than others⁵. Once the NHS allotment is used up, that dental practice may reserve the rest of their appointments for private patients. However, this is largely not made clear to patients and some patients reported feeling pressure to pay privately for care which left them feeling suspicious that they were being treated unfairly.

Patients who contacted Healthwatch Camden about access to dentistry over the last year reported being offered a private appointment after being denied the NHS appointment.

“They all are happy to book me immediately for a private appointment, but are saying they are too busy to take on new NHS patients (which doesn't make sense if they have availability to book me right away as private).” - patient via email May 2021

“For the past several years I have been unable to be accepted as a NHS patient at ANY dentist specified as NHS dentist. I tried everywhere in Camden but I also went beyond. I had one encounter with a Camden NHS dentist who was willing to take me on. However, during my first consultation she kept telling me to do

⁵ 22 December 2020. [NHS Dental Contract Arrangements Letter for Q4](#)

the treatment privately...with her, that is at the NHS surgery. This behaviour frightened me, I lost my trust in her and left. I have been looking for another dentist since then (and before then).” - patient via email Feb 2021

Patients without an appointment told to call 111, pay, or wait

We asked practices what patients should do if they are struggling to access NHS dental care and nearly all (29 out of 33) said they refer patients to NHS 111.

NHS 111 has the ability to provide advice over the phone or refer patients to an emergency dental hub if the situation requires immediate care. However, some patients have informed Healthwatch Camden that they have had no luck with 111 or that they were given only temporary pain relief and are still in need of substantial care.

Seven of the 33 practices said they advise patients to call around to other practices to check availability, two said they would advise patients to pay privately, and one said they would take the patients number and call them back if there was a cancellation.

“Find another dentist who can see you on the NHS, which will be rare. Otherwise, wait.”

Given the limited availability across practices in Camden and the limited capacity of NHS 111, this left most patients to either wait or pay.

Next Steps

There is currently an unmet need of NHS dentistry in Camden, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue is particularly pronounced for anyone who is not deemed to be an ‘existing’ patient with a dentist or is considered a ‘new’ NHS patient. Whilst these findings are a snapshot of a period in time, if the issue persists, there could be a growing unmet dentistry need and worsened health inequalities for those who cannot pay.

Healthwatch Camden will be working with Camden & Islington Public Health to determine whether a needs assessment of dentistry within the borough is needed. These findings will also be shared with the Local Dental Committee⁶ and the NHS.

If you are struggling to access NHS dentistry at this time, please get in touch info@healthwatchcamden.co.uk or call 020 7383 2402.

Healthwatch Camden would like to thank their volunteers for their work on this project.

Limitations

Due to the ever-changing nature of the current environment, this data is at risk of quickly becoming outdated. The report specifically applies to a snapshot of time between 12th and 28th of May. Practice staff made it very clear that situations can quickly change based on

⁶ A statutory NHS body representing general dental practitioners working in the North London boroughs of Camden and Islington. LDCs can support all dentists in their locality across a range of issues. They can represent dentists at local commissioning level, and communicate local concerns at national level.

cancellations, staff calling out sick, and more. Additionally, in some instances estimates of waiting times were given which may not have been 100% accurate.

About Healthwatch Camden

Healthwatch Camden is an independent organisation with a remit to make sure that the views of local service users in Camden are heard, responded to, taken seriously, and help to bring about service improvements.

Our duties (which are set out under the Health and Social Care Act 2012) are to support and promote people's involvement in the planning, running and monitoring of services; to gather views and experience and to make reports and recommendations for improvement based on those views; to offer information and advice on access to services and choices people can make in services; and to enable local people to monitor the quality of local services.

Our remit extends across all publicly funded health and social care in the borough. It includes statutory powers to enter and view any publicly funded health and social care service and to call for a formal response from the relevant bodies to any of the recommendations we make.

Healthwatch Camden has a seat on the Health and Wellbeing Board and contributes directly to strategies to reduce health inequalities across the borough.