



healthwatch
Halton

March 2022

About us

We are your health and social care champion.

We make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care.

We also help people to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice and we provide an independent Complaints Advocacy Service to support local residents who may need help to make a complaint about an NHS service.

We are part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch which last year helped nearly a million people like you to have your say and get the support you need.

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Background

Concerns over access to NHS dental services has been one of the main issues people have raised with us over the last 18 months. We have seen a large increase in the number of enquiries from people in need of NHS Dental services locally, and an increase in the number of people telling us they have been removed as an NHS patient from their existing practice and had nowhere to go for treatment.

Nationally, Healthwatch England continues to hear concerns about access to dentistry services. Public feedback on NHS dental care has risen five-fold over the last 18 months, compared to pre-pandemic levels. It now accounts for nearly 25% of all the feedback the Healthwatch network receives.

The regional and national picture

The latest results from the National GP Patient Survey¹ mirror the increased volume of negative feedback that the Healthwatch network have received about dentistry. When asked if people successfully got an NHS dental appointment in the last two years, in 2020, 6% of the respondents had said no.


In contrast, in 2021, this figure was nearly four times higher at 23%.

The latest Healthwatch England findings² show the following:

- 🦷 Public feedback on NHS dental care has risen five-fold over the last 18 months, compared to pre-pandemic levels. It now accounts for nearly 25% of all the feedback Healthwatch England receive.
- 🦷 Analysis of 8,019 people's experiences of NHS dentistry between§ April 2020 and September 2021 shows that four in five people report struggling to access NHS dental care, including emergency treatment.
- 🦷 Positive sentiment, which was around 30% before the COVID-19 pandemic, is down to its lowest ever level – at just two per cent.
- 🦷 Some dental practices have either shut down or have gone fully private. Some dentists have used up their total NHS capacity and are asking people for private fees instead.
- 🦷 Many people find it hard to get up-to-date information about which practices are taking on new patients because NHS and dentists' websites aren't updated regularly. As a result, more people are contacting their local Healthwatch hoping that they'd provide them with accurate information.

¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/2021/07/08/gp-patient-survey-dental-statistics-january-to-march-2021-england/>

² <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/blog/2021-12-12/recovery-nhs-dental-care-too-slow-help-thousands-left-pain>

 It is often the most vulnerable people in our society, including children, disabled people and those living in care homes, who are suffering the most.

We reviewed data reported by NHS Digital about the number of adult and child patients seen by dentists in 2019 and 2021. The figures below highlight the reduction in numbers for England and the North West.

| Number of patients seen | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Adult patients | 30-Jun-21 | 30-Jun-19 | % reduction |
| England | 18,190,987 | 21,959,979 | -17% |
| North West | 2,501,833 | 3,058,555 | -18% |
| Child patients | | | |
| Child patients | 30-Jun-21 | 30-Jun-19 | % reduction |
| England | 3,946,048 | 7,000,685 | -44% |
| North West | 507,059 | 949,784 | -47% |

It is clear from these figures that the NHS has seen far fewer patients in 2021 compared with 2019, without doubt a direct impact of the pandemic.

However, the difference in the number of appointments for children in 2021 is particularly stark. There has been a 47% drop in the number of child patients seen between 2019 and 2021, from almost 950K in 2019 down to 507k in 2021

This dramatic fall is likely to impact children's long-term dental health if local dental services do not recover soon.

The lack of dental care access for children is a worrying trend that must be tackled.

Poor oral health has detrimental effects on children and young people's physical and mental health.³

³ Local Government Association & Public Health England - [Tackling poor oral health in children](#)

Finding dentists accepting new NHS patients

Another issue we were hearing about, even before the pandemic, was how difficult it could be for people to find a dental practice accepting new NHS patients. This has been an issue for a wide variety of groups, including:

- 🦷 People who may not have been to a dentist in a while (usually more than two years) and may no longer have a usual dental practice.
- 🦷 People whose usual practice has closed or has moved entirely private.
- 🦷 Parents looking to start taking a child or children to the dentist.
- 🦷 People who have recently moved to Halton.
- 🦷 Those who are unhappy with their usual dentist.

Part of the issue is that data on dental practices is often out of date on the NHS.UK website – the primary source of information for people looking to find a new NHS dentist.

We reviewed the information on all our local dental practices, listed on the NHS.UK website (<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist>) on 15 March 2022.

We found that just five practices had updated their status within the past 3 months.

Under the current arrangements, practices are responsible for updating their own information on the NHS website.

| Dental Practices Accepting NHS Patients – Regional figures | | | | |
|--|------------------|------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Region | Accepting Adults | Accepting Adults : free care | Children | Average |
| East of England | 9% | 9% | 10% | 10% |
| London | 21% | 22% | 19% | 21% |
| Midlands | 30% | 30% | 29% | 30% |
| North East & Yorkshire | 25% | 24% | 22% | 24% |
| North West | 1% | 1% | 4% | 2% |
| South East | 12% | 12% | 14% | 13% |
| South West | 1% | 1% | 3% | 1% |

According to data provided to Healthwatch England by NHS Digital on 7 December 2021, nationally, only 11% of dental practices were currently taking on new adult NHS patients. The figures for the North West show an even more depressing picture with just 1% of NHS dentists accepting adult patients and 4% accepting children.

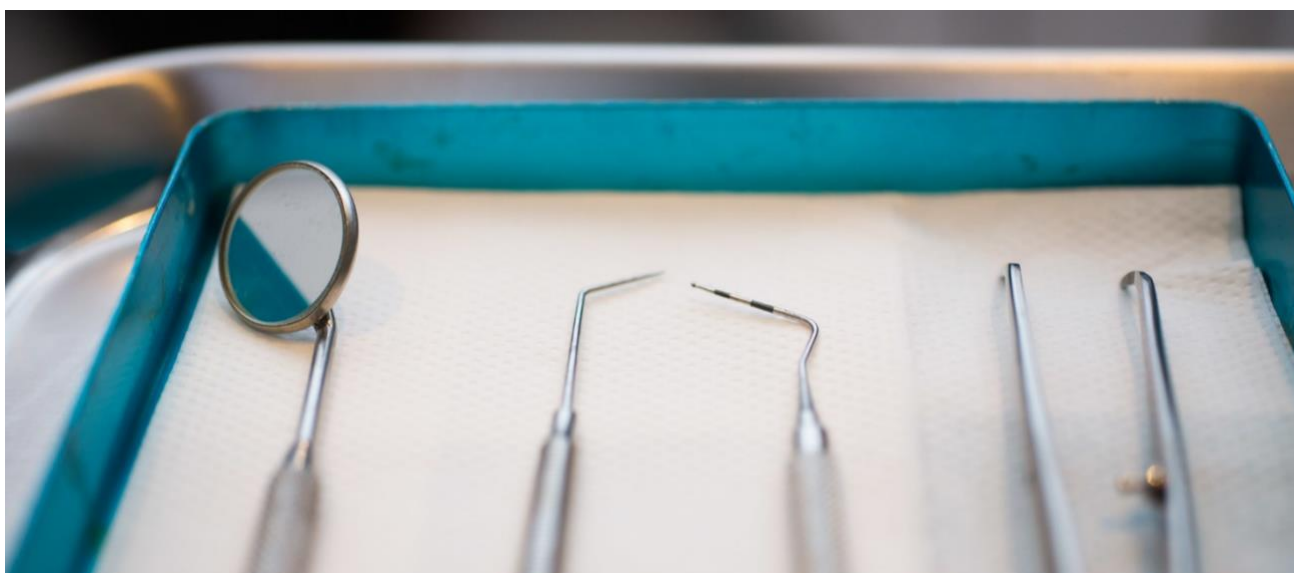
When we checked on NHS.UK on 15 March 2022, it still showed no dental practices in Halton taking on any new NHS patients, adult, or child.

What we did

During July and August 2021, we contacted all local dental practices, by email and phone, to get an accurate picture regarding appointment availability and waiting times. None of the local dental practices we heard from were taking on new NHS patients; with one practice telling us they had a waiting list of more than 500 people and wouldn't be expecting to see any of those until late 2022.

Following this we ran a short online questionnaire, to gather feedback from local residents who had either accessed or attempted to access dental care since March 2020. The questionnaire was accessible from 1 October 2021 to 8 November 2021.

Responses received after 8 November, and feedback received via email, telephone and through social media were used as part of the qualitative feedback only and are not counted in the quantitative figures.



What we heard

176 responses were received to our questionnaire. 58%, (103), told us they were registered with an NHS Dentist. 11% (19), said they were registered with a private dentist and 31% (54) weren't registered with any dentist.

Of those people not registered with a dentist, 57% (31), said they had been removed from the list of their previous dental practice without their prior knowledge.

'They kicked both of us off because not been for two years but for the last two years my wife has been in and out of hospital, so now we're looking for wheelchair accessible dentist but still not got one'

'After not visiting a dentist for a long time I was currently not registered anywhere. I got an infection in my mouth and needed anti biotics upon calling my old dentist they just advised that I have to call around dentists in the area to see if they were taking on patients due to the current guidance, so I felt helpless and I knew doctors would not be able to help.'

'As soon as lockdown ended, I rang up and was told my hubby and I had been deregistered. I explained we couldn't go or even contact due to THEM being closed due to Covid, but they wouldn't let us re-join after 30 odd years with the practice.'

The removal of patients from a practice list with little or no prior notice has left many people unable to access routine treatment for themselves and family members.

The reason given was generally that they hadn't attended the practice in the previous 18-24 months.

If all dental practices routinely sent email or text message check-up reminders to patients it may go some way to help alleviate this issue.

Routine appointments

Of the 131 people who told us they had tried to book a routine appointment with their normal dental practice, 43% said they had been unable to get an appointment.

'I tried to rebook a check-up several times for my child to be told not doing check-ups.'

Of those who managed to get an appointment, 56% were seen within a month. 22% waited up to 3 months for an appointment, while a further 22% waited more than 3 months to be seen.

Difficulties booking routine appointments resulted in some people developing oral health problems.

'I was with an NHS dentist prior to the pandemic and was due my 6 monthly check-up when we went into lockdown. Of course, they haven't been offering appointments for over 12 months. Add my 6 months since my last visit... 18 months since I had been for an appointment. When they started doing check-ups again, I rang to make an appointment and they said I was no longer registered with them as I hadn't attended for over 15 months! And they weren't taking new patients. I had been with that dentist for years. The only local dentist taking patients was a private one. I needed to be seen as I had broken a tooth that was very sharp and cutting into the inside of my mouth.'

We asked how often people would normally have visited the dentist for a routine appointment.

49% said they normally went every 6 months. A small number visited every 3 months (generally with children), with a further 29% having a check-up every 12 months.

5% had check-ups every 2 years, while a further 14% only ever went to the dentist in an emergency.

More than 1 in 3 people hadn't had managed to have routine check-up in the past 2 years. A further 23% had their last routine appointment more than 12 months ago, while 41% of people had managed to get a routine appointment during the past year.

When people were able to get an appointment, they were generally very happy with the quality of treatment and care from their dentist.

77% rated their care and treatment as good, or very good, with 8% rating treatment as poor or very poor.

'I have suffered with a dental phobia for a long time, hence my reluctance to attend. The dentist and the practice have a calming atmosphere. They are friendly and go out of their way to make sure you feel comfortable. Everything is explained and planned so I know what to expect and when.'

'Just a great service. Always look after me when I go. I have breathing difficulties and use ambulatory oxygen, nothing is any trouble to them.'

15% of people rated their treatment and care as neither good nor poor.

'It was ok. I was recommended to have a filling because my tooth felt soft apparently. They barely touched my tooth and the X-ray wouldn't reach. It sometimes feels like they just want your money rather than delivering quality care.'

'Private premium services such as Invisalign procedures seemed to take more importance than routine check-up. Not the way it used to be. They need to get back to just being a family dentist without all the fake camaraderie. Appointment cancelled once and ended up being delayed by two months. They couldn't do my clean at the same appointment as my check-up like usual "because of COVID". Coronavirus seems to get the blame for everything these days, even when it's evidently nothing to do with the virus.'

Emergency appointments

86 people said they had tried to book an emergency appointment in the previous year.

55% managed to get emergency treatment within a day, with another 25% having to wait up to a week for help. 20% told us they had to wait more than a week for treatment.

11 people said they paid for private treatment to get their emergency treatment.

Those people already registered with a dental practice were generally supported well by their existing practices if they needed emergency treatment.

Over three-quarters of people rated their emergency treatment as good.

'I tried calling the emergency dental line for 2 days in a row. I was on the phone for 2 hours only to be told on the second day that they don't deal with crowns. I called the dentist practice directly and they moved patients around to fit me in on the day I called them.'

'My dentist has restored my faith in dentists. My mouth was in a bit of mess, and he has been able to get it all sorted for me even in the current climate of waiting lists and Covid backlogs.'

11% rated their treatment as ok, with 12% having a poor experience of emergency treatment.

'Had emergency appointment for missing crown, tooth no good but dentist wouldn't extract in case it broke as he would then have to refer me to oral surgeon. Can't just refer me to oral surgeon, as they are only taking extreme emergencies, so have temp filling which won't last and hasn't solved the problem. I also have another tooth that had a missing crown for over 2 years and still not sorted.'

Dental Helpline

People needing urgent dental treatment during 'in-hours' periods, 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday, are encouraged to contact their regular dentist, if they have one.

Outside those hours, or if people do not have a regular dentist, an emergency telephone helpline (0161 476 9651) is available (from 8.00am to 10.00pm). This covers the whole of Cheshire & Merseyside.

The helpline website, <http://www.mastercall.org.uk/service/dental-helpline>, states it assists people who need urgent dental treatment, provides advice and signposts people to other relevant services. If you do not have a regular dentist then the Dental Helpline will triage your call, give advice and guidance to manage your dental problem or assist you to find an appointment, as long as you meet all the eligibility criteria.

From phone enquiries we've received in the past year, it appears that not all dentists are providing patients with the emergency dental helpline contact number if they were unable to treat the patient.

'After not visiting a dentist for a long time I was currently not registered anywhere. I got an infection in my mouth and needed antibiotics upon calling my old dentist they just advised that I have to call around dentists in the area to see if they were taking on patients due to the current guidance, so I felt helpless and I knew doctors would not be able to help.'

Feedback received on the Cheshire & Merseyside Emergency Dental Helpline has been mixed. A number of people told us they were confused with being given a Manchester number for the helpline, with one telling us their family member, *'Has not contacted emergency number due to distance from his home.'* Another person said, *'They said I'd have to go to Manchester and I couldn't.'*



Other people also told us of delays in getting through to the helpline number, with one person, who was supporting asylum seekers in Halton, telling us of difficulties accessing emergency treatment.

'I support asylum seekers in the borough and during the pandemic some needed emergency treatment. It was nigh on impossible to get through on the emergency number, especially if you don't speak or understand English very well.

One woman who was pregnant and in a lot of pain, had to wait 4 months for an appointment and could not take painkillers. She had to travel to Liverpool for it so had to pay for travel from the very limited money they receive. I tried ringing several local dentists to try to register our asylum seekers but hardly any were taking on NHS patients, and none had appointments for months ahead.'

'Pre-covid I had a large swelling, the practice gave me a generic helpline phone number to ring. A long time on hold then I was given an appointment in Chester.

This dentist told me to return to the practice for root canal work. The NHS dentist said he couldn't do it and referred me to a private practice in Liverpool. The cost of the root canal work was £1200.'

While the helpline service for Cheshire & Merseyside uses a Manchester 0161 dialling code, we noted the emergency dental helpline service for Manchester, operated by the same organisation, uses an 0333 non-geographic telephone number.

Switching the Cheshire & Merseyside helpline to a non-geographic 0333 telephone number may help avoid some of the confusion the 0161 number seems to attract.

0333 numbers have the same rates as local 01/02 numbers regardless of whether you are using a mobile phone or landline. 0333 numbers are also recognised by packages that offer free minutes.

NHS 111 'find a dentist' website and NHS 111 phone line

The NHS England website⁴ states, **'NHS 111 is here to make it easier and quicker for patients to get the right advice or treatment they need, be that for their physical or mental health. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week'**

80% of people told us they would look online for information on dental services accepting NHS patients. Information they would look for includes if dental practices are taking new patients, when routine care appointments will restart, how they can access urgent care if needed, and the cost, if any, for their dental treatments.

While we found the NHS website has information on some of these topics we are still receiving phone calls and emails from people struggling to find the right information when they need it.

'NHS website was showing out of date information, so I had to use Google and ring round all the practices.'

'The online system is an absolute joke. Needless to say, after spending 18 months ringing around every single one in Halton there are no spaces, nor can I get on a waiting list.'

15% of respondents told us they had contacted the NHS 111 to seek help in accessing dental treatment. The majority had rung the NHS 111 phone line. One person said the information they were given by NHS 111 on dental practices was out of date.

Others were confused over the purpose of NHS 111, with one person telling us they hadn't rung NHS 111 as they saw it as an emergency only route to treatment, almost equivalent to 999. Another queried how the NHS 111 phone line could help in providing dental treatment.

The experience of using NHS 111 was mixed with 8 people rating the experience as poor, 9 people rating it as neither good or poor and 10 people rating it as good.

'I tried to get an appointment for my partner, I rang NHS 111 who gave me the number of the emergency line which was a Manchester number. I was on the phone for over 45 minutes only to be told that there were no appointments. I rang back NHS 111 for advice which was very poor.'

⁴ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/urgent-emergency-care/nhs-111/>

Impact on people due to lack of timely dental care

Lack of access to dental care is impacting people in different ways.

We heard from some people who had been regularly prescribed antibiotics without resolving the underlying issues.

I have two impacted wisdom teeth and have to have an emergency appointment approximately every two months for the pain where I'm just given antibiotics. I'm now regularly taking strong painkillers. I rang NHS customer service and was basically told I am lucky if I can find a dentist who will put me on a waiting list to see me in 12 months.'

Some felt they had no option but to pay for private treatment as that was the only way the dentist would accept them as patients.

I needed my crown refitted after it fell out. I called every NHS dentist in Widnes and some further afield to be told that they were not taking on patients and when they opened again (which most were stating Christmas) for the ones who did have a waiting list (which wasn't many), it was already 12 to 18 months long. I couldn't wait that long.'

Others explained that they were suffering with daily discomfort due to being unable to get treatment.

'There were no routine appointments available during covid, so much so I've broken teeth during covid and had to put up with the pain, discomfort, embarrassment and struggled to even eat food.'

'No further appointment was booked, no pain killers were provided considering I have 7 teeth that need taking out 4 of which are just roots with no tooth and I'm in absolute agony daily to the point I cannot eat nor drink and had to take time off work because of this.'

'They cannot help if there's nowhere to send you... I was crying with intense pain all night.'

Travel

The majority of people 74% (126) lived within a 15-minute trip to the dentist.

19% (32) travelled up to 30 minutes to a dentist, while 10 people said they travelled for up to an hour to see their dentist.

Two people explained they had a trip of more than 1 hour by car to see their dentist, located outside Halton.

- 🦷 77% (134) of people said they travelled to their dental appointments in their own car
- 🦷 12% used public transport or got a lift or used a taxi.
- 🦷 11% walked to their appointment.

Payments

We asked people if they had to pay for their NHS treatment. 140 (81%) people told us they paid for their NHS treatment.

Over 1 in 4 people said they didn't have costs explained to them prior to their treatment.

51% of respondents were asked to pay for their treatment after the treatment had concluded, while 30% told us they paid for their treatment upfront. Almost 1 in 5 were unsure at what stage they had been asked to pay.



Lack of NHS dental care access for children

Prior to the pandemic we'd received little feedback regarding access to dental care for children.

In the past 12 months we've seen an increasing number of calls from parents struggling to access NHS dentistry for their children dental care and it is likely that there are many young children in Halton that have never seen a dentist.

One father from Widnes contacted us to say that he'd been unable to find any local dental practice willing to take on him and his two young children, aged 2 and 6.

A mother in Widnes told us her two young sons who had been removed from the books of the dental practice and she was unable to get them registered anywhere else due to covid restrictions.

Another parent, completing our questionnaire, explained that they were having difficulties finding a dentist who caters for children and adults with special needs.

'I adopted a child and couldn't register her anywhere. Ended up going through the national emergency system to get her an appointment as she was in pain which then led to her being registered after she was treated.'



Other issues

While working on this project we found a lack of clear and up to date data on the local dental care system.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance⁵ states that:

- **The shortest interval between oral health reviews for all patients should be 3 months.**

A recall interval of less than 3 months is not normally needed for a routine dental recall. A patient may need to be seen more frequently for specific reasons such as disease management, ongoing courses of treatment, emergency dental interventions, or episodes of specialist care, which are outside the scope of an oral health review.

- **The longest interval between oral health reviews for patients younger than 18 years should be 12 months.**

There is evidence that the rate of progression of dental caries can be more rapid in children and adolescents than in older people, and it seems to be faster in primary teeth than in permanent teeth (see full guideline). Periodic developmental assessment of the dentition is also required in children.

Recall intervals of no longer than 12 months give the opportunity for delivering and reinforcing preventative advice and for raising awareness of the importance of good oral health. This is particularly important in young children, to lay the foundations for life-long dental health.

- **The longest interval between oral health reviews for patients aged 18 years and older should be 24 months.**

Recall intervals for patients who have repeatedly demonstrated that they can maintain oral health and who are not considered to be at risk of or from oral disease may be extended over time up to an interval of 24 months. Intervals of longer than 24 months are undesirable because they could diminish the professional relationship between dentist and patient, and people's lifestyles may change.

To ensure the current dental needs of local people are being met we'd like to see the **Oral Health Needs Assessment** reviewed yearly as per NICE guidelines.

This information was not easy to find on Halton Borough Council's website, with JSNA information from 2014⁶ and a 2017⁷ update being the latest we could find.

One Halton / Health & Wellbeing Board – Oral Health should be adopted as a priority area by the HWBB with a focus placed on the oral health of children.

⁵ NICE - Dental checks: intervals between oral health reviews – <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg19/chapter/1-Guidance>

⁶ Halton Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2014 - Health and Wellbeing During the School-Age Years. <https://www3.halton.gov.uk/Documents/public%20health/JSNA/childrens/CTJSNA/schoolage.pdf>

⁷ Halton Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2017 - Health and Wellbeing During the Early Years. <https://www4.halton.gov.uk/Documents/public%20health/JSNA/childrens/earlyyearsjsna.pdf>

Conclusions

The plain and simple fact is it isn't easy to find an NHS dentist in Halton.

Our report highlights just some of the issues local people have been facing while trying to access NHS dental treatment.

Healthwatch England has called on the Government and NHS England to speed up dental contract reform and provide significant and sustained funding to tackle the underlying dual problems of dental access and affordability. We support this call, as currently NHS dentistry is neither accessible nor affordable for everyone. But it should be!

What we'd like to see happen next

- 1. Reform of the way dentistry is commissioned** – While we call for change to the provision of services locally, we are very aware of the huge challenges dentistry is facing nationally. Given our findings, and those of several other local Healthwatch across the country, we are not assured that access to NHS dental care will improve for some considerable time after all restrictions on dental care have been removed. Healthwatch England has called on the Government and NHS England to speed up dental contract reform and provide significant and sustained funding to tackle the underlying dual problems of dental access and affordability. We support this call. We'd like to see clear, honest communication from NHS England to the public to set realistic expectations and ensure that the current challenges in NHS dentistry capacity don't undermine confidence in NHS dental care.
- 2. Lack of access to dental care is a worrying trend that must be tackled immediately.** Poor oral health has detrimental effects on children and young people's physical and mental health. **We recommend an immediate review of the Oral Health Needs Assessment** to check on the current needs of people in Halton. To ensure the current dental needs of local people are being met **we recommend that the Oral Health Needs Assessment is reviewed yearly as per NICE guidelines.** A particular focus should be placed on the oral health needs of children. **We recommend that Oral Health be adopted as a priority area by the Health & Wellbeing Board.**
- 3. Access to an NHS dentist** – everyone should have their dental needs supported and not be removed from a practice list unless appropriate contact is made. It

was concerning to hear from some patients that they were totally unaware that they had been removed from the practice list.

- 4. Review Emergency dental treatment** – We found that access to emergency dental care was not always equitable for all patients. For those not registered with a dentist, emergency treatment, support or assistance needs to be available and readily accessible.
- 5. Clear costs for NHS treatment** – People told us that they found NHS dental charges difficult to understand. NHS dental services need to be transparent and affordable, with appropriate costs explained fully prior to treatment and implemented appropriately. For many dental patients, the cost of dental care is a major factor in their decision to continue and complete the full course of treatment. Patients should also understand when they are being seen as a private patient and agree to the costs associated with that course of treatment.
- 6. NHS 'Find a dentist' website** – As the primary go-to source for information on local NHS dental practices, we don't believe it is fit for purpose. We call for significant improvements to be made to the NHS 'Find a Dentist' website with better accessibility and consistency in the public-facing information provided by NHS England and dental surgeries on which practices offer NHS treatment and are accepting new patients.

Response

Any formal responses received to this report will be added here.



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