

NHS North East and Yorkshire (North East and North Cumbria)

COVID-19: Resumption of dental services

This is our fourth stakeholder bulletin which aims to keep you up to date with the current situation regarding the resumption of dental services across our region, which like everywhere in the country have been severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

The dental sector faced particular challenges during the pandemic due to the proximity between a dental professional and a patient's airway and the relatively high proportion of aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) undertaken. In dentistry, AGPs are when treatment involves the use of a high-speed drill.

During the first wave of the pandemic, in the interest of patient and dental staff safety, routine and regular dental services were paused and urgent dental centres (UDCs) were established to ensure patients who were in dental pain could access dental services.

All practices reopened for provision of face to face care between July and September 2020 and whilst the NHS contractual expectation is that all NHS funded capacity is used to safely deliver the maximum possible volume of care for patients, revised contractual targets have been in place since July 2020, which outline the requirements on dental practices to deliver a proportion of their normal activity volumes. Activity levels have increased since then and from 1 October 2021 the minimum expectation is for practices to be delivering 65% of their contracted activity volumes. However, it will be some months before dental services return to providing care in a similar manner and to the activity levels that patients previously experienced. It is also dependent on the further easing of COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures which is being led nationally.

Current impact on patients

Practices are providing services in line with standard operating procedures issued by the Chief Dental Officer and Public Health England which means the level of appointments they are able to provide continues to be significantly reduced.

NHS England recognises that people may be experiencing difficulties accessing dental services, and that these difficulties are more widespread in some part of the Region where the Covid pandemic has resulted in a delay in progressing plans to increase capacity. However, work is now underway to improve, where possible, general dental access and reduce inequalities in identified priorities areas such as North Cumbria, Durham and Darlington.

Given the reduction in the number of available appointments, it is necessary for dental practices to triage patients who contact them to ensure that patients with the greatest clinical need, ie those requiring urgent dental care and vulnerable patients including children are prioritised, which likely means a delay for patients seeking non-urgent and more routine dental care such as check-ups.

NHS England continues to support all dental providers across the region to resume regular NHS dental services safely and effectively and in accordance with the advice set out by the Chief Dental Officer.

It is important to remember that unlike general medical services patients do not 'register' with a dentist and it is not a requirement for a patient to be on a specific practice's list to access NHS dental care.

Many NHS dental practices also offer private appointments which, as independent contractors, they are at liberty to do. Mixed practices, offering both NHS and private treatment, tend to have separate appointment books for both NHS and private treatment, with staff teams often employed to provide

these different arrangements. NHS provision must be available across the practice's contracted opening hours and demand for NHS treatment is such that they could have used up their available NHS appointments and practices may, therefore, offer private appointments to patients.

Progression to resume the full range of routine dental care is being risk-managed by practices themselves and they should be seeing patients with the most urgent issues first, followed by those that have open courses of treatment, with a return to a full routine dentistry, such as check-ups and recalls, following in due course when they have capacity to provide this. We continue to work with our NHS dental providers to explore opportunities to increase the clinical treatment capacity available within the constraints of the Covid pandemic and infection prevention and control measures to ensure that care can be delivered safely for both patients and staff.

The current advice to patients is:

- If your teeth and gums are healthy – a check-up, or scale and polish may not be needed for up to 24 months
- When you come into the surgery for an appointment, please remember that social distancing remains in place and you will still need to wear a face mask upon entering the practice.
- The infection control process for dentistry has not changed with the lifting of COVID19 restrictions – masks and hand hygiene measures are still required.
- It's important that dental practices continue to follow this guidance as they are a healthcare setting and they are doing all they can to ensure your safety when you come to the practice.
- Every dental practice is working extremely hard to provide care to patients, within the restrictions and guidance – please be respectful at all times.
- All NHS dental practices are following the guidance, and private dental practices are recommended to follow them by the health regulator, the Care Quality Commission.
- Similar public health measures are still in place for hospitals and GP practices too. Advice is that the infection prevention control measures in dentistry should continue to be followed until further notice
- Dental practices will continue to have restrictions on leaving time between patients to ventilate rooms – this has an impact on how many patients they are able to see each day.
- All dental practices are prioritising patients for treatment based on urgency and priority groups, such as those more at risk of dental disease or children.

Our previous messages are also still in place:

- Please only visit your practice if you have an appointment and telephone to book an appointment only when you have a dental problem – dentists are currently prioritising the vulnerable or those with the most urgent need.
- Appointments for some routine treatments, such as dental check-ups, may be delayed.
- Your practice will look a little different than usual as they will be operating in a way that observes COVID-19 social distancing and hygiene rules to ensure everyone's safety.
- If you develop an urgent dental issue telephone your regular dental practice (or any NHS practice if you don't have a regular dentist) for advice on what to do next.
- Dental issues will be triaged over the telephone, initially. If the dentist thinks that you need face to face care, you will be given an appointment at the practice and advised to attend, as long as you do not have any COVID-19 symptoms.
- Anyone clinically triaged as requiring treatment will be given clear instructions by the practice on what they need to do prior to their appointment and once they get to the practice.
- If after a telephone triage the clinician decides the issue is not urgent, you may be given advice on how to self-manage the dental problem until an appointment becomes available. You will be advised to make contact again if your situation changes/worsens
- We know you would like to be able to make an appointment for routine dental care but please be understanding of the current situation with regards to the prioritisation of those with urgent needs and be respectful of the clinical decisions taken by the practices.

For out of hours care:

- Toothache should initially be managed with over the counter pain relief until an appointment can be made with your general dental practice. A pharmacist can advise you what is the best pain control to meet your needs.
- Lost fillings, crowns or bridges, broken teeth or braces are not usually deemed to be clinically urgent and patients are advised to contact their local dental practice when they re-open.
- Only ring NHS 111 out of hours when your dental needs cannot be met by self-care and cannot wait until your practice is open to contact them for advice.

Communicating with the public

Please find below a number of tweets/Facebook messages and a digital asset that you may share on your own social media accounts etc.

- **Tweet:** Dental practices are safe and open for face to face care, but it is not 'business as usual'.
- **Tweet:** You will still be required to wear a face mask when you visit a dental practice and follow strict hand hygiene. Please be respectful of the guidance and dental teams at all times.
- **Tweet:** The dentist is best placed to clinically assess dental issues. If your dental issue is deemed non-urgent, we would ask that you don't then call 111 for a second opinion leaving 111 staff free to deal with other patients with urgent health issues.
- **Tweet:** Please be aware that dentists are currently still prioritising vulnerable patients or those with urgent dental needs; it is therefore unlikely that routine dental care such as dental check-ups will be available at this time. #helpushelpyou
- **Tweet:** Please note that appointments for some routine dental treatments, such as dental check-ups, are limited at this time as dentists prioritise vulnerable patients and those with urgent dental needs. #helpushelpyou
- **Tweet:** Only ring NHS111 out of hours should you require urgent dental care – please note that lost fillings, crowns or bridges, broken teeth or braces are not usually deemed to be clinically urgent and patients are advised to contact their local dental practice when they re-open.
- **Tweet:** Toothache should initially be managed with over the counter pain relief until an appointment can be made with your general dental practice – if you don't have a regular dentist call your nearest NHS dental practice. #helpushelpyou

Digital Asset



OPEN Accessing dental care **NHS**

Dental Practices are open, however practices will need to prioritise patients with the most urgent need.

If you need help from a dentist:

- Contact your regular dentist or if you do not have one, call any NHS dental practice
- You will be given advice or offered an appointment if appropriate.
- For urgent dental care, out of hours or at weekends that cannot wait, please ring NHS111

Please do not visit your dental practice unless you've been advised to. This will ensure the practice can continue to provide essential care safely.