

Healthwatch Darlington

Experiences of dental care services

March 2020 to January 2022

February 2022

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About Healthwatch Darlington

Healthwatch Darlington is the health and social care champion for people who live and work in the Borough of Darlington. As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to people's feedback to improve standards of care.

We use feedback to better understand the challenges facing the NHS and other care providers locally, to make sure people's experiences improve health and care services for everyone.

We are here to listen to the issues that really matter to our local communities and to hear about people's experiences of using health and social care services.

We are entirely independent and impartial, and any information shared with us is confidential.

Executive summary

Healthwatch Darlington wanted to understand the experiences of their community with dental care services during the period from the first lockdown due to COVID-19, in March 2020, to date.

Healthwatch England is at the forefront of campaigning for reform of the NHS dental contract alongside the British Dental Association (BDA). Healthwatch Darlington have joined forces with eight other local Healthwatch to support the national picture as well as informing local service providers of the experiences of their local patients.

The findings within this report highlight that whilst there are good experiences of dental care in the Borough, general feedback indicates that staffing shortages, and historic concerns within the dental system are adversely impacting public dental health. In addition, additional Health and Safety measures, whilst welcome and necessary, are leading to delays in treatment.

There are some clear indicators of areas where improvements could be made including ensuring NHS Choices website contains up to date information, providing supportive advice to patients who are on waiting lists and often in discomfort, and improving NHS 111 advice and information.

We will use the information gathered within this report to support the national work that Healthwatch England is leading on, and also as a collective local Healthwatch, influence the North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care System to improve services locally.

Locally we are collaborating with other Healthwatch teams in the North East to provide support to our communities with initiatives such as the 'Myth Busting' leaflet which aims to raise awareness and support members of the public by dispelling common rumours relating to NHS dentistry.

Michelle Thompson BEM
Chief Executive Officer, Healthwatch Darlington

Introduction

Data from the Department of Health, highlights that almost 1,000 dentists working in 2,500 roles across England and Wales left the NHS last year (source: BBC News, January 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59874320>). This is having an adverse impact on members of the public being able to see a local dentist for both regular check-ups and where emergency treatment is needed.

This national picture is echoed in the North East, and Healthwatch teams, including Healthwatch Darlington, have seen a significant increase in people's concerns around seeing a dentist.

Eight teams from the North East and North Cumbria Healthwatch Network agreed to undertake a joint project to understand the concerns of their respective local communities.

Participating North East and North Cumbria Network Healthwatch Teams

Gateshead	Stockton	North Tyneside	South Tees
Hartlepool	Newcastle	Northumberland	North Tyneside

Our collective aim is to:

- Influence the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (NE&NC ICS), local service providers, and NHS England to improve access to NHS dentistry.
- Inform the national picture through sharing our findings with Healthwatch England who are calling for reform of the NHS dental contract alongside the British Dental Association (BDA).
- Support improved information for patients regarding NHS dentistry.

Methodology

Our approach is based on the collective agreement of the eight local Healthwatch detailed in the 'Introduction' section. Each local Healthwatch will create their own report highlighting feedback from their respective local communities.

Healthwatch Northumberland are coordinating the project and will produce a combined report, which will be shared with the NE&NC ICS and Healthwatch England. Each local Healthwatch will be responsible for discussions with their own local providers where appropriate.

Survey for members of the public

An online and paper survey which focuses on trying to get treatment, experiences of treatment and asks about NHS and private treatment was launched on 29th November 2021. It was distributed through local Healthwatch networks online, at planned

engagement events, and with partners. The closing date for the survey was 7th January 2022.

Survey participants were invited to take part in one or more of five sections of the survey which were: finding a dentist, routine check-ups, appointments for minor issues, urgent appointments, and treatment at a dental hospital.

We asked about experiences happening throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period commencing March 2020, to date. The questions were drafted by Healthwatch Northumberland, agreed with the collective eight local Healthwatch teams, and tested with our volunteers.

Forty-eight people took part in the Healthwatch Darlington led survey.

Survey for local dental practices

During the same period, November 2021 to January 2022, our volunteers contacted local dental practices, with a series of questions, to understand the availability of services.

The questions were drafted by Healthwatch Northumberland, agreed with the collective eight local Healthwatch teams, and tested with our volunteers.

Ten dental practices responded to our volunteers.

Public information campaign

The collective Healthwatch involved will work with Local Dentist Committees and the Commissioners (NHS England) to develop an information campaign to inform people about getting dental care. Work on this campaign will begin in December 2021 and will be influenced by the findings of the first two elements of this research.

As an example, North East Healthwatch teams have already produced a ‘myth busting’ leaflet, dispelling the most common rumours relating to NHS dentistry. It gives the facts about being registered with a practice, why you may be offered a private appointment, capacity for routine appointments, and what constitutes emergency care. The leaflet can be accessed here:

<https://www.healthwatchdarlington.co.uk/sites/healthwatchdarlington.co.uk/files/Dental-myth-busting-HW-North-East-partnership.pdf>

Demographics

Appendix one includes a full breakdown of the demographic profile of people who took part in this survey.

Survey findings: Summary

Survey findings: Members of the public

We had forty-eight respondents to our survey.

All responses related to experiences happening currently, to experiences which have been ongoing since 2019.

Participants were invited to take part in one or more of five sections of the survey.

1. 21% (10) told us about finding a dentist.

All respondents were looking for an NHS dentist and found it very difficult to find one even though they had accessed available information on NHS Choices and direct contact with dental practices. All ten also said they had not found a dental service which met their needs and encountered obstacles such as the NHS Choices website information being out of date. Concerns were expressed that what had started out as minor dental issues were now becoming more serious, and respondents were worried this would adversely impact their long-term dental health.

2. 44% (21) told us about routine check-ups.

Respondents told us that the range of time they had to wait for a routine check-up was between three weeks to over a year. Not surprisingly there were mixed responses to how easy it was to book routine check-ups and how happy they were with the timescale. Likewise, respondents overall experience was fairly evenly split along a scale of 'Terrible' to 'Excellent'.

Those who were most content were not on a long waiting list and felt assured with Health and Safety measures during their check-up. Those who were least content were on a lengthy waiting list, complained about the poor communications they received from their dental practice keeping them up to date with what was happening, and expressed concerns about having to pay for Private treatment in the absence of NHS availability.

3. 4% (2) told us about appointments for minor issues.

Two survey participants responded to this question. Both had polar opposite experiences of care.

4. 15% (7) told us about urgent appointments.

Five of the seven respondents found it very difficult to book an urgent / emergency appointment. The range of appointments offered were from next day through to several weeks, with some still waiting for an appointment for what they consider to be an urgent issue.

Patient experiences included examples of timely responses and kind staff, however, the comments in this section in general revealed a strong sense of frustration from patients regarding the lack of communication from dental practices, lack of empathy from the staff patients speak to on the phone, lack of quality advice whilst awaiting treatment, and lack of help from the NHS111 service.

5. No survey participants responded to the section about treatment at a dental hospital.

Additional feedback

Cllr Mary Layton, the Councillor for Pierremont Ward shared with us some of the experiences her constituents approached her about, as their councillor, during the period under review (March 2020 to January 2022). Several of her constituents asked her for help about a *“total lack of access to any dental services at all during the past 20 months”*.

Cllr Layton told of her first-hand experience of the difficulties residents face if they are not internet users and / or have considerable health issues in addition to needing dental care. She also shared examples of dentists having no capacity to take on extra patients, leaving patients of retiring dentists nowhere to access dental care when they need it.

Cllr Layton shared with us her concerns about families who felt that going to the dentist was *“not affordable”* and saw evidence of families, including children, not having attended a dentist appointment for several years, highlighting the need for accessible dental services for all.

Survey findings: Dental practices

Nine out of ten dental practices told us they were taking on new NHS patients, however some reported waiting lists, one as long as 500 people. All advised us that NHS waiting times for routine dental treatment was no longer than six months, which was in line with their waiting times for Private patients.

Some practices advised they were back to ‘normal service’ after the COVID-19 backlogs, more said that they were still not at full capacity and waiting times were longer as a result. Having the benefit of taking on a new dentist had a significantly favourable impact on waiting lists.

Teams told us they were feeling the frustration of the patients, and often this had an adverse impact upon staff. Some dental practices shared with us their processes to triage patients, and how they managed urgent appointments alongside routine dental work.

Telephone and email feedback

In addition to the survey we have also received 21 enquiries via telephone or email all unable to obtain a dental appointment despite calling every dentist in Darlington as well as contacting 111. Two people actually extracted their own teeth due to being in so much pain and unable to obtain an emergency appointment.

Detailed survey findings: Members of the public

1. Finding a dentist

There were 10 responses to this section of the survey.

1. We asked respondents to rate how easy it was to find a dentist.

All ten respondents found it 'Very Difficult'.

Very Difficult *	**	***	****	Very Easy *****
10	0	0	0	0

2. We asked what the ten respondents did to find a dentist (they could choose more than one option).

Ring round dental practices	Search the internet	Look on NHS Choices website	Ask family and friends	Contact local Healthwatch
10	9	10	2	1

3. We asked the ten respondents what kind of dental service they were looking for, NHS, Private or Either.

All 10 respondents said NHS.

4. We asked them if they were looking for help with a particular dental issue.

Half said yes (broken or chipped teeth), and half said no. One respondent told us:

"During the lockdown period in 2020, I cracked my tooth, and due to dentists not conducting appointments I was unable to get the issue rectified. After lockdown my dentist had turned private and since the beginning of 2021, I have been unable to find a dentist who has available NHS placements. I am now on multiple waiting lists but am yet to be accepted into the dentist. As time goes on, I am now experiencing regular toothaches and am self-medicating this with ibuprofen, this has become worse due to colder weather as my teeth are now sensitive. I am concerned how my other teeth will be affected by the time I find an NHS dentist as I am heavily relying on the right-hand side of my mouth."

5. We then asked them if they found a dental service to meet their needs.

All 10 respondents said 'No', with comments including:

"Have tried various NHS but no reply." "No one accepting NHS patients". "No one had an available space."

Comments also included NHS Choices website information being out of date, advising dentists were accepting patients, but when the dentists were contacted, patients were told they were not accepting new patients.

6. We asked if they had used any services, other than their dentist, to help them get advice about accessing dental care. Respondents were advised they could select more than one response from NHS 111, GP, Pharmacy, Other.

- 1 respondent said they had used NHS 111.
- No respondents said their GP or Pharmacy.
- 6 respondents said they had not used any other service.
- 3 did not respond.

7. Respondents were asked if there was anything else that would have improved their experience.

Comments included:

“NHS website kept up to date as to which practices are accepting new NHS patients.”

“Yes, we need NHS dentists taking on new patients.”

2. Routine check-ups

There were 21 responses to this section of the survey. Responses related to experiences between May 2020 to December 2021.

- 14 wanted to tell us about their own experiences.
- 2 wanted to tell us about the experiences of their child.
- 5 said ‘Other’

1. We asked respondents to rate how easy it was to book a check-up appointment.

Very Difficult *	**	***	****	Very Easy *****
9	3	2	1	6

2. We asked if they were looking for help with a particular dental issue.

Yes	No
3	18

Those that said yes were looking for help with lost fillings, check-up and clean.

3. We asked the respondents how happy they were with the timescale of appointments.

16 of the 21 respondents in this section answered this question.

- 7 were happy as they got an appointment within a reasonable timescale.
- 3 were happy as they got an appointment but had to wait longer than they would have liked.
- 6 were unhappy because even though they got an appointment they had to wait too long.

The time respondents had to wait for appointments ranged from 3 weeks, to having waited over a year without an appointment.

4. We asked respondents to rate their experience overall.

Terrible				Excellent
*	**	***	****	*****
6	4	2	2	7

Comments included feeling confident that Health and Safety was paramount. A couple of respondents were unhappy that the dental practice had not been in touch with them to keep them up to date with what was happening. Concerns were also shared about having to attend private appointments and pay for dental treatment in the absence of NHS availability.

5. We asked if any further care or treatment was needed.

Yes	No	Did not respond
4	13	4

Those that said yes required a follow up appointment with their dentist.

6. When asked if this appointment was NHS or Private.

NHS	Private	Did not respond
17	2	2

7. We asked if they were using the same dental practice they used before the pandemic.

20 responded to this question, and all respondents said 'Yes'.

8. We asked, 'Since March 2020, have you had to seek private dental care for a check-up because you couldn't get an NHS appointment?'.

Yes	No	Did not respond
1	17	3

3. Appointments for minor issues

There were 2 responses to this section of the survey.

- 1 wanted to tell us about their own experiences.
 - 1 wanted to tell us about the experiences of their child.
1. We asked respondents to rate how easy it was to book an appointment for a minor dental issue.
 - 1 said 'Very Difficult'.
 - 1 said 'Very Easy'.
 2. We asked the respondents how happy they were with the timescale of the appointment.

- 1 was happy as they got an appointment within a reasonable timescale.
- 1 was unhappy because even though they got an appointment they had to wait too long - two and a half years and the survey respondent has still not got a date.

3. We asked respondents to rate their experience overall.

- 1 rated their experience as 'Terrible'.
- 1 as 'Excellent'.

4. We asked if any further care or treatment was needed.

1 of the 2 respondents answered this question and said 'No'.

5. When asked if this appointment was NHS or Private.

- 1 said NHS.
- 1 said Private.

6. We asked if this was the same dental practice they used before the pandemic.

- 1 said 'Yes'.
- 1 said 'Other', it was an orthodontist.

7. We asked, 'Since March 2020, have you had to seek private dental care for a check-up because you couldn't get an NHS appointment?'.

Both respondents said 'No'.

4. Urgent appointments

There were 7 responses to this section of the survey.

- 3 wanted to tell us about their own experiences.
- 1 wanted to tell us about the experiences of their child.
- 3 said 'Other', and included responding on behalf of their spouse, and another on behalf of their mother.

1. We asked respondents to rate how easy it was to book an urgent or emergency appointment.

Very Difficult				Very Easy
*	**	***	****	*****
5	2	0	0	0

2. We asked what the urgent dental issue they needed treatment was for, and if they were in pain, the severity of that pain.

Responses included:

- Severe toothache, broken and cracked teeth with 'immense' pain levels.
- Hiatus in root canal treatment leading to a fractured tooth.
- Toothache due to lost fillings.

- Painful abscess requiring lengthy antibiotic treatment due to not being able to see a dentist to treat the abscess.
- Tooth extraction due to deterioration of dental issues following not being able to see a dentist to treat the original concern such as a lost filling.

3. We asked the respondents how happy they were with the timescale of appointments.

4 of the 7 respondents in this section answered this question.

- 1 was happy as they got an appointment within a reasonable timescale.
- 2 were happy as they got an appointment but had to wait longer than they would have liked.
- 1 was unhappy because even though they got an appointment they had to wait too long.

The range of how long respondents waited were getting an emergency appointment the next day, through to several weeks, some waiting several months, and some still haven't got an appointment or way forward for treatment for what they consider to be an urgent issue.

4. We asked respondents if they were offered self-help advice for their urgent issue whilst waiting.

2 said 'Yes', and commented:

"I was given advice, but it was not useful - It was common-sense advice that I already was aware of."

"Two dentist services were kind and offered help, every other dentist I contacted were the total opposite and quite rude in their short temper of 'there is no appointments, and we are not taking new people' delivery".

5 said 'No', they were not offered self-help advice while waiting.

5. We asked respondents if they were given clear information about who to contact and what to do if the situation got worse.

Yes	No
1	6

Comments included:

"It was just the attitude that was difficult to deal with when you are in severe pain. If you can't be helpful, just say so nicely there is no need to have such attitude to people who are asking for help."

"... was told she would be put on the waiting list, and at that moment it was an 8 month wait. That is now 10 months she has been waiting. They do not answer their phones anymore."

"There was no advice given that I was not already aware of and employing - I called only after I had tried the things they could suggest (and they had failed) I was given no new information. It felt as though my issue was not taken seriously."

6. We asked respondents to rate their experience overall.

Terrible				Excellent
*	**	***	****	*****
6	1	0	0	0

7. We asked if they accessed any follow up treatment after their emergency dental appointment.

4 responded to this question.

- 1 said yes, from their dentist.
- 2 said 'No', they could not access the follow up treatment they needed.
- 1 said 'No', they did not need follow up treatment.

8. When asked if this appointment was NHS or Private.

6 responded to this question, and all 6 said NHS.

9. We asked if this was the same dental practice they used before the pandemic.

Yes	No	Did not respond
5	1	1

10. We asked, 'Since March 2020, have you had to seek private dental care for urgent care because you couldn't get an NHS appointment?'.

Yes	No	Did not respond
2	4	1

11. We asked respondents if they had called NHS 111 for emergency dental care since March 2020?

Yes	No
4	3

Comments included:

"My daughter has. Still unable to find a dentist anywhere who will take her on as NHS. How are people supposed to get help for their teeth?"

"Told me to ring round - no more help than that, even when i said i already had."

"They have me two numbers to call. Neither were taking on new NHS patients."

12. We asked respondents if there was anything else that would have improved their experience of urgent dental care.

Comments included:

“Look at my teeth and give me the correct treatment instead of charging me for no exam and giving me a prescription for toothpaste.”

“Yes, actually care about patients would be a start. Stop being rude to people who need help.”

“Not having to wait so long that the problem escalated. Alternate access to emergency appointments.”

“To be able to see a dentist and obtain treatment.”

Detailed survey findings: Dental practices

10 dental practices responded to this survey.

1. Is the practice currently accepting new NHS patients for treatment?

Nine practices told us they were accepting new NHS patients, one was not

2. What is the approximate waiting time for NHS patients to have routine dental treatment?

Time period	Responses
Less than 1 month	2
Between 1 - 2 months	5
Between 2 - 3 months	1
Between 3 - 6 months	2
More than 6 months	0

3. Do you ask about a patient's symptoms and level of pain before allocating an appointment or are appointments allocated on a first come first served basis?

Question	Responses
Ask about symptoms and level of pain before allocating an appointment	8
Allocate appointments on a first come first served basis	2

4. Is the practice currently seeing private patients?

Yes	No	Did not respond
9	0	1

5. Do you offer a private appointment if there are no remaining NHS appointments?

Yes	No	Did not respond
4	3	3

6. What is the approximate waiting time for private patients to have routine dental treatment?

Time period	Responses
Less than 1 month	1
Between 1 - 2 months	4
Between 2 - 3 months	0
Between 3 - 6 months	2
More than 6 months	0
Did not respond	3

7. How has COVID-19 affected your provision of NHS funded services?

Responses varied from practices telling us they had not been affected, to reduction in capacity to see patients resulting in longer waiting lists:

“Not at all.”

“Initially closed but caught up now.”

“Closed for three months, gave telephone advice, Opened at 40% capacity, now at 60% capacity.”

“Longer wait, used to be one month, now four to five month wait. Patients get frustrated and take it out on staff.”

“Hugely. Backlog of check-ups. Struck people off who hadn’t been seen since 2017.”

“Extended opening times.”

8. If you have no appointments available, do you ever signpost to other dental practices?

Yes	No	Did not respond
2	6	2

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Responses included:

“We receive up to twenty calls a day from people asking for an appointment.”

“We refer people to NHS111 or emergency dentist. We have only one dentist currently working.”

“We triage appointments and if we have capacity, we will treat non clients. We do not have preferential treatment for Private patients over NHS patients - waiting list is the same for both.”

“Waiting list currently 500.”

“We have four emergency appointments every day - they do not have to be registered.”

“We were able to take on 100 new people recently as we employed a new dentist. General shortage of dentists due to retirement or returning home. No help from NHS as we are expected to fill quotas - staff at breaking point due to abuse. Would like to see hubs operate for emergencies.”

Conclusions

The findings within this report highlight that whilst there are good experiences of dental care in the Borough, general feedback indicates that staffing shortages, and historic concerns within the dental system are adversely impacting public dental health. In addition, additional Health and Safety measures, whilst welcome and necessary, are leading to delays in treatment.

There are some clear indicators of areas where improvements could be made including ensuring NHS Choices website contains up to date information, providing supportive advice to patients who are on waiting lists and often in discomfort, and improving NHS 111 advice and information.

Locally, improved communication from dental practices to keep patients up to date with what is happening, and to provide immediate advice and support for those on waiting lists where they are experiencing pain would be welcomed by the public.

Next steps

Healthwatch Darlington will share this report with Healthwatch Northumberland who are creating the regional report to be shared with Healthwatch England and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (NE&NC ICS).

Collectively we will use our findings to:

- Influence the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (NE&NC ICS), local service providers, and NHS England to improve access to NHS dentistry.
- Inform the national picture through sharing our findings with Healthwatch England who are calling for reform of the NHS dental contract alongside the British Dental Association (BDA).
- Compare with Healthwatch England’s latest report, ‘What people have told us about dentistry: A review of our evidence - April to September 2021’ can be found here: [20211014_HWE Dentistry Update Dec 2021.pdf \(healthwatch.co.uk\)](#)
- Maintain our support to service users encouraging them to interact and share their views directly with providers.

Acknowledgments

Thank you from Healthwatch Darlington

Thank you to members of the public who responded to our survey and shared their experiences to help improve services.

Thank you to those dental practices who took part in our survey and responded to our volunteers.

Thank you to our volunteers who helped us create and promote the surveys.

Thank you to our colleagues in other local Healthwatch who we worked with to create and deliver this project.

Contact Information

Healthwatch Darlington Limited

Jubilee House, 1 Chancery Lane,

Darlington, DL1 5QP

Tel/Text: 01325 380145 / 07525 237723

Email: info@healthwatchdarlington.co.uk

Website: www.healthwatchdarlington.co.uk

Facebook: [@HealthwatchDarlington](https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchDarlington)

[@youthwatchdarlo](https://www.facebook.com/youthwatchdarlo)

Twitter: [@healthwatchDton](https://twitter.com/healthwatchDton)

Instagram: [@healthwatchdarlington](https://www.instagram.com/healthwatchdarlington)



Appendix one: Demographics

1. Age category	Participants	
13 - 17 years	0	
18 - 24 years	2	4%
25 - 34 years	4	8%
35 - 44 years	6	13%
45 - 54 years	11	23%
55 - 64 years	7	15%
65 - 74 years	5	10%
75+ years	0	
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not answer	13	27%

2. Gender	Participants	
Man	5	10%
Woman	30	63%
Intersex	0	
Non-binary	0	
Other	0	
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not respond	13	27%

3. Is your gender different from the sex you were assigned at birth?	Participants	
Yes	1	2%
No	34	71%
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not respond	13	27%

4. Ethnic background:	Participants	
Arab	0	
Asian / Asian British: Bangladeshi	0	
Asian / Asian British: Chinese	0	
Asian / Asian British: Indian	0	
Asian / Asian British: Pakistani	0	
Asian / Asian British: Any other Asian / Asian British background	0	
Black / Black British: African	0	
Black / Black British: Caribbean	0	
Black / Black British: Any other Black / Black British background	0	
Gypsy, Roma, or Traveller	0	
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Asian and White	0	
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Black African and White	0	
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White	0	
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background	0	
White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh	34	71%
White: Irish	0	
White: Any other White background	1	2%
Another ethnic background	0	
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not respond	13	27%

5. Long term health condition	Participants	
Yes	13	27%
No	22	46%
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not respond	13	27%

6. Disability	Participants	
Yes	6	13%
No	28	58%
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not respond	14	29%

7. Carer	Participants	
Yes	8	17%
No	24	50%
Prefer not to say	0	
Did not respond	16	33%