



Dental services in Suffolk

A summary of enquiries to Healthwatch Suffolk

Published December 2021

About Healthwatch Suffolk...

We are the health and social care champion for Suffolk. We have the influence to make sure people are heard within the design, delivery and scrutiny of local services.

We record people's experiences of using services and use them to shape and improve local care. We can also help people to get the information and advice they need to access help and support relating to their health, social care or wellbeing needs.

Established in law, we are independent and have the influence to make change happen. We make sure that providers and commissioners of services account for people's lived experiences when they are working to plan, deliver or scrutinise care.

We believe strongly in working in co production with our local services,

Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations and communities. Such partnerships are a crucial part of being able to influence and bring about change.

For more information about Healthwatch Suffolk, please visit our website:

www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk

This report...

This document is an account of comments and enquiries related to NHS dental services recorded by Healthwatch Suffolk between the period January 2021 and early December 2021.

This short briefing has been created to support Healthwatch Suffolk's involvement with local, and regional, networks considering the impact of poor access to NHS dentistry across the county.

The feedback within this briefing has generally been obtained through delivery of Healthwatch Suffolk's Information and Signposting service.

Healthwatch Suffolk has not completed any dedicated research regarding NHS dental services. Comments from news items on the HWS website are also included (www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/services).

Analysis of themes (All services)



Signposting enquiries

HWS has, at times, been contacted daily by people struggling to find NHS dental provision (mostly by telephone and email). **269** individual contacts were recorded between January and early December 2021. The total number of contacts is likely to be higher because of missed recording that can occur.

Signposting enquiries from the public are anonymously documented on Healthwatch Suffolk's database, which enables it to monitor trends and to share local intelligence with Healthwatch England. Themes and sentiment were applied as summarised below.

The quantities of feedback reported are not sufficient to claim that the opinions expressed are representative of the entire population of people who have tried to access dental services. The feedback provided is nonetheless important and reflects what has become one of the most significant local issues concerning people's health, care and wellbeing.

Theme	Enquiries	Description
Help to access / Lack of access	256	All enquiries from individuals who have asked for help to find an NHS dentist.
Multiple practices	161	Enquiries that specifically reference contact with multiple practices, or infer that more than one practice has been approached.
Affordability	66	Enquiries expressing that the enquirer, or someone they care for, is unable to afford private work or pay for costs they have been quoted.
Pain and other symptoms	56	Enquiries that mention lack of access despite ongoing pain or other impacts on wellbeing (e.g. mental health).
Services for children and families	34	Enquiries about dental access for children and families.
Continuation of treatment	25	Enquiries that raise concerns about being unable to obtain continued treatment. This usually includes that the person has been able to access an urgent referral but the initial treatment has been a 'patch' for the problem.
Pregnancy	10	Enquiries about lack of access, and rights of access, to dental care when a person is pregnant.



“I have paid as much as I can and I simply can’t afford any more...”

Requests for help to access dental care (lack of access)

The nature of the HWS signposting service means that the majority of requests for help and advice relate to access concerns. People usually contact the team because they have been searching for a dentist and have been unable to obtain access to an appointment. Many enquiries are signposted to local Healthwatch from the NHS website.

Two hundred and fifty-six enquiries specifically reference access concerns. For example:

“I have called multiple dentists and checked many websites, however most do not seem to be taking on new patients and the ones that do only seem to be taking on private patients. I am well overdue a check-up...”

“I have been trying to find an NHS dentist for my two daughters for the last 12 months, but have not been able to find one. They are now 16 and 18yrs old. They are in desperate need of a dentist as I feel they both need braces, I am also extremely concerned that I will have to pay now that one of them has turned 18.”

Lack of understanding about how dental practices operate means that many people have been unable to access an appointment despite believing that they were entitled through ‘registration’. Often people are told that they cannot book an

appointment because they have not seen a dentist at the practice within a 24 month period.

In reality the value of ‘registration’ is highly limited within dental services, but this reasoning from local practices is a source of frustration for many and is unhelpful to building people’s understanding about how dental services differ to other NHS provision.

“I have had a filling fall out over the weekend and am in a little pain when eating. I rang my usual dentist this morning and was advised I have been de-registered as I have not attended for a few years (I didn’t know you had to attend every two years to remain registered). They advise they are also not now taking new NHS patients.”

Multiple practices

One hundred and sixty-one enquiries specifically mention contacting multiple practices as a part of a person’s search for dental care. Often, this has included contact with in excess of twenty, or even thirty, practices without success of obtaining an appointment.

“I have tried numerous dentists in a 16 mile radius and cannot find anybody who will take on NHS patients, especially those on benefits. Not only is this frustrating but I also feel discriminated against because I am entitled to free care.”



My son is in agony with his tooth, he's seen an emergency dentist who gave him a temp filling, but it still hurts a lot, he cannot get into a NHS dentist at all.



“ My father has had emergency care via 111 and has been told the repair is temporary and that he needs to find a dentist to do other work. I have called over 30 practices and none will take him on. My father has dementia and is finding all of this very stressful. **”**

“ Caller contacted us on behalf of their partner who has lost a filling. The person has quite a lot of discomfort. The caller says they have phoned 27 dentists but no one will see him. **”**

“ Could you advise me on any dentists taking NHS patients please. I have called every dentist I can find and still no luck. I have seen a private dentist and I can no longer afford to carry on with treatment as the price for one of my teeth is almost £1,000. I have paid as much as I can and I simply can't afford anymore. **”**

Pain and other symptoms

Fifty-six enquiries mention that people have been unable to find a dentist despite experiencing pain. Some people have described the impact of this on, for example, their mental health, eating habits and general wellbeing.

“ I am really struggling to find an NHS dentist to take me on. I have phoned so many (in tears). I have an extremely bad tooth, which I am certain that needs root canal, but it has become unbearable now. I still have four months left of my free dentist as I had a baby less than a year ago. Please do you think you could help me? **”**

“ A caller was looking for dental support, as they had had tooth pain for a week and had been away from work as a result. A doctor had prescribed pain medication, but the caller cannot access a dentist anywhere that is taking

on patients. **”**

“ Caller was seeking NHS dental treatment but even the dental practices that 111 suggested say they are unable to see them. The caller has been trying for weeks to get an appointment as they are in pain. They are unable to travel out of town, which complicates things further. **”**

“ Enquirer was facing difficulties finding an NHS dentist. They had been searching for more than a year. They expressed that they had broken teeth and needed root canal treatment. Enquirer is in pain every day. They had called 111 and had been offered a couple of phone numbers to contact. They tried them and were told 'we are not accepting new NHS patients'. The enquirer noted that they were now desperate for treatment, but cannot afford private care. **”**

“ Caller had his teeth damaged when he was attacked a few years ago. He has had ongoing problems but has been unable to find an NHS dentist to do the work. The person has called multiple dentists but when they see him they will only do the work privately. This caller is in pain constantly and finds eating difficult. **”**

Cannot afford private work

Sixty-six enquiries directly mention worries about not being able to afford private care if they need treatment urgently.

Some individuals have been quoted large sums of money for treatment that they cannot afford and this has included people who state they are a pensioner or in receipt of benefits.

Examples of enquiries include:



I am in excruciating pain and I have an infection under my teeth. The cost of treatment privately is thousands of pounds.

I'm on a low income and cannot afford that. I desperately need to find an NHS dentist, but can find nothing in my area.



“ A caller contacted their dentist for an appointment regarding a jaw concern. When they turned up for the appointment the practice informed them that, as they had not visited the dentist within the past two years, they would not be able to treat them as an NHS patient. For that reason the caller was told they would have to pay for the appointment. They paid the fee of £80 because they needed to make a decision on the spot. They have now been told they need further work at a cost of more than £400. As someone with a low income, the caller expressed that they could not afford this. The caller also mentioned that someone they know has a crack in their tooth which is causing a lot of pain. They had also been asked to pay privately for an appointment - a cost of well over £1,000. The dentist prescribed pain killers and antibiotics, but they are still in a lot of pain and have not been able to find affordable care. ”

“ Caller expressed concern that they had been dropped by their practices once they turned 18. They expressed that, since then, they have not been able to get a check-up and now their teeth are in need of treatment. The caller is on universal credit and expressed that they could not afford a £32 check-up appointment. The caller

could not understand why they were unable to obtain access to an NHS dentist or why they were no longer listed with a practice. ”

“ My wife needs root canal surgery. She has tried every dentist for miles around and cannot get booked under the NHS. In desperation, she had a consultation privately and has been put on antibiotics. The have quoted more than £1,500 for the work. We obviously cannot afford this so need to see an NHS dentist urgently. ”

“ I'm trying to find a dentist in my area and none of the practices are taking NHS patients on. What can I do? I can't afford private treatment. I have lived in this area for two years now and am getting nowhere. I have had to pay private charges for my child but I can't do that for me. ”

“ I have tried other dentists within travelling distances from my home but to no avail. It seems there is no immediate solution other than to go private which, as a pensioner, I cant afford knowing how much work will now need to be completed. I have a feeling the consensus will be for me to get a set of false teeth which in itself is going to get me into debt big time I have no savings at over 70 years old. ”

Pain has not made a difference for some people

People frequently report lack of access to dental care despite having pain, sometimes severe and limiting. Often, those who obtain an urgent appointment cannot then access continued treatment to resolve their dental problem unless they pay for private work. The cost of the ongoing treatment is sometimes significant and so they are left with no options.



“I'm trying to find an NHS dentist for my daughter. She experienced dental pain and had to go private - but I can't afford the prices. They tell me I'll have to pay well over £3,000 to save her teeth, which is absolutely ridiculous amount of money to pay. I've phoned several NHS dentist with no luck. **”**

“Due to the closure of their dental practice, a couple was seeking another dentist due to other concerns about their health. They have gone private to address the biggest concern, but have been quoted just under £1,000 for all the work that needs doing. The caller said they were not in a position to be able to afford this. **”**

“I am in excruciating pain and I have an infection under my teeth. The cost of treatment privately is thousands of pounds. I'm on a low income and cannot afford that. I desperately need to find an NHS dentist, but can find nothing in my area. **”**

Sometimes people opt for private work initially because of the lack of alternative NHS option and then feel unable to consider the cost of the additional treatments needed to resolve their concern.

“I have called every dentist I can find and still no luck. I have seen a private dentist and I can no longer afford to carry on with treatment as the price for one of my teeth is £900 alone. I have paid as much as I can and I simply can't afford anymore. **”**

“Caller had been trying to register their whole family at an NHS dental practice for a year without success. They have just paid privately for check-ups, but at the appointment was told they would need just under £1,000 worth of treatment, which they cannot

afford. **”**

“I have needed to see a private dentist for a broken tooth, it cost me £1,000 for root canal treatment and then they wanted another £1,200 to crown the tooth. I cannot afford that, I am trying to get an NHS dentist. The temporary cover on the tooth is now wearing away. **”**

Continued treatment

Nineteen enquiries raise concerns about being unable to obtain continued treatment. This usually includes that the person has been able to access an urgent referral to an NHS dentist (e.g. via NHS 111) because they were in pain. That initial treatment is often a 'patch' for the problem and the person is then left with a continued concern that they are unable to resolve.

“My son is in agony with his tooth, he's seen an emergency dentist who gave him a temp filling, but it still hurts a lot, he cannot get into a NHS dentist at all, he really would appreciate any help. **”**

“After terrible tooth pain and unable to find an NHS dentist, I had to go to A&E. They prescribed antibiotics for an infection. After they were finished I then had to call 111 to get an emergency appointment, at the appointment they found out what was wrong but would only do the work privately which I can't afford. So I am left with an ongoing problem which will need further antibiotics every time it flares up, I am a tax payer so should be entitled to this service. **”**

“Caller has been looking for a new dentist for a couple of years. She lost a filling recently and managed to get treatment via 111 to have the filling

replaced, however, this has fallen out. She has called 40 practices to ask if they will offer treatment and all have said no as they are not accepting NHS patients. She called the practice that did the filling recently and they said that they wouldn't see her again and that she needed to find a practice to register with. ”

“ Caller went to her local dentist who referred them to a practice to have a tooth filled. The filling has come out and she has now got an infection. They went back to the original dentist for an emergency appointment and paid £25. They suggested root canal work and a crown. This will cost more than £700, which they cannot afford. The caller is looking for an NHS dentist to do the work. They are now in pain and have phoned around but no-one is accepting NHS patients. Caller says they have called 111 on a number of occasions but is not getting any help. ”

Access for children and families

Thirty-five enquiries directly reference difficulties people have faced with accessing dental care for their children or families.

“ I have been trying to register my two year old with an NHS dentist, but so far I have not been successful. Unfortunately, all of the dentists I have tried say they don't have spaces. ”

“ I have three children and I have not been able to find any dentist within a 50 mile radius that are registering new patients for NHS dentistry. Can you please advise? ”

“ I'm having trouble finding a dentist currently taking on new NHS patients in my area. I'm trying to register

myself and my 9 month old baby but having no luck in my immediate or surrounding areas. ”

“ I have been searching for an NHS dentist for my young grandson who is living with me, but have been told no surgeries are taking on NHS patients, not even children. ”

Pregnancy

Ten enquiries were from individuals who said they were pregnant and unable to access their entitlement to free treatment.

“ I am struggling to find an NHS dentist to accept me and my newborn in my area. I am in moderate pain but can't afford a routine emergency appointment whilst on maternity pay. ”

“ I am really struggling to find an NHS dentist to take me on. I have phoned so many (in tears). I have an extremely bad tooth which I am certain that needs root canal but it has become unbearable now. I still have a few months left of my free dentist as I had a baby less than a year ago. ”

“ Caller explained that she has had a baby and would like to make an appointment to get her teeth checked - as she is in the maternity window for free dental treatment. She said she has phoned dentists all around the county but to no avail. ”

“ Caller is looking for an NHS dentist as his wife is pregnant and the midwife has urged treatment (possible impact on the baby's birth outcomes). He has tried a number of practices and no one will see her. ”

Vulnerable people and community dentistry

A number of enquiries highlighted problems with access to special care dentistry, community dentistry or care for vulnerable individuals.

“Contact from a son seeking dental care for his mother who has a dementia. They are new to the area and are finding it difficult to determine her dental need due to this. It is difficult to get her out to appointments (short distance of 10 minutes is manageable). Community dental service says they cannot treat her because she is able to walk and therefore does not meet the criteria for access. **”**

“My daughter is in a wheelchair. She has been unable to register with a disabled access NHS Dentist and cannot afford private treatment because she has a low income. Her teeth are in urgent need of treatment. The information we have suggests a referral is needed from a general dental practitioner, which she doesn't have & can't get. Please do not suggest ringing round all dental practices as I've tried several times on her behalf. 111 were not helpful as they could not guarantee disabled access, only emergency treatment. In urgent need of help please. **”**

“I had a massive abscess/swollen jaw and just wanted the tooth extracted. 111 just gave me numbers of dentists in the area and told me to call them in the morning, but I'd already spoken to all of them. I even tried to remove it myself, such was the pain (don't try it, it didn't go well!) You just have to go private I'm afraid and pay £200 just for an appointment like I did (an hours drive from Bury). A poor show! **”**

“I rang another dentist and was told if it was serious to contact 111. I had developed an abscess on one side of my mouth and lost a filling on the other side. I managed to contact a dentist and was told to explain my symptoms on the phone. I was told to pick up a prescription. I was amazed as I was not even examined! In the meantime my tongue began to swell as it was catching a tooth. Eventually I found a dentist in Ipswich to treat my teeth. Unfortunately my tongue was quite swollen by this time so I made an appointment to see my doctor. On examination he was quite shocked and booked an appointment for me to visit the hospital. To date my appointment is on 19 May and have been asked to take a COVID test before attending the hospital. My experience had left me feeling quite distraught at the whole service and for those who are still struggling to get a dentist. **”**

Comments on HWS news items

People have recorded feedback against a number of HWS website news items. The comments have not been included within the theme analysis but support many of the concerns identified from signposting enquiries.

Some examples of note include:

“Tried to make a dental appt today for myself, been told by my dentist that because I havent been since Sept 18, I am no longer on their books as I should have been to see them within 2 yrs!! But my Dentist emailed me in April this year (6 months after I have been removed from their books) to say my dental examination was due. I queried this with them and they have said its the NHS who have removed

me from their books not them!!! Do they really expect me to believe that, when the receptionist proceeds to tell me....You can register with us privately and you will be seen very soon!!! OH WHAT A SURPRISE. To say Im fuming is an understatement. Worked all my life, paid my stamp to be told that load of baloney!!!! **”**

“ *I was trying to find a dentist for my wife who suffers from dementia. After many calls in my area all the dental practices refused appointments as NHS patient but want to offer to see her privately and pay an enormous sum of money, even the one that she has been on their list for 3 years but as we have not the need to see a dentist for 2 years, she has been barred from NHS dentistry. How can the Gov't allow this sort of practices to go on especisllly for people who cannot afford private exorbitant prices.* **”**

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