Summary report – peoples experiences of dentistry

Local Healthwatch across the West Yorks and Harrogate area have for the last few years been receiving multiple enquiries/feedback relating to dentistry, in particular from people asking for help to find a dentist taking on NHS patients (the link on the NHS website suggests that Healthwatch might be able to help: https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/dentists/how-to-find-an-nhs-dentist/).

Prior to the Covid 19 Pandemic, most local Healthwatch could provide some direction and had knowledge of Practices taking on patients in the local area (often by word of mouth as the NHS website was rarely up to date). *"I am really struggling to find an NHS dentist that is accepting new patients at the moment. I am an apprentice and get paid minimum wage and cannot afford a private dentist. I read online that if you cannot find a dentist to email your local healthwatch".*

However, since the Covid outbreak the number of calls to local Healthwatch has significantly increased. In Leeds alone, the number of dental enquiries increased from 66 (1st April 19 – 31st April 20) to 265 (1st April 20 – 31st March 21). Similar increases happened across the area and we are not able to help as much as we could before.

The overall theme is one of confusion and frustration. People have felt unable to access clear information about the changes to dentistry services over the course of the pandemic. Now that many dentists are beginning to offer more treatment, we are still hearing from people who aren't able to access care.

We know that dentists have been trying to treat patients as much as possible and have to operate with limited capacity and strict safety procedures. We also acknowledge that local action is constrained by complex national challenges around the commissioning and contracting of dental services. However, the impact on people trying to access dental care during Covid-19 has been significant, and we know that many people have been left distressed and confused by the situation.

What are the issues we are hearing about?

Lack of access to NHS dentists

This remains the main source of enquiries. People who are not already connected to a dentist are having significant problems in finding one that will treat them. This includes families trying to get appointments for children and people new to the area.

People are spending a long time ringing round individual practices and being told that waiting lists are between 12 months and 4 years. Local Healthwatch are not able to help them anymore as the provision isn't there. This is causing a great deal of stress and could potentially increase oral and other health conditions.

"I am feeling defeated with the help I've received relating to my case so my apologies if I come across coarse. I am 6 years on waiting lists, using the means and tools mentioned online I have effectively contacted every dentist in York, Selby & Leeds/Bradford. I have attended Leeds emergency dental care for antibiotics more

than I can count also. After 6 years I have only been given antibiotics by the dental system in this region (North & West Yorkshire). I am 24 years old and am due to lose all my teeth by the failings on the NHS to provide access to these services. Can this healthwatch help me find someone to give me the proper care I need? In 6 years I haven't had a single dental x-ray. I need to be referred to the dental hospital but I can't be referred unless I have a dentist, which is quite ironic. I have broken teeth below the gum line which is potentially very dangerous and I'm at risk of septicemia due to having to take antibiotics constantly, as I have open pockets in my gums.

I'm really hoping someone can help me as I'm at my wits end with this. If I could afford private care it would have been sorted by now."

"Late 2019 I tried to book an appointment with my dentist to discover he had gone entirely private, so I had no dentist for myself, or my three kids (two of whom now adults). I tried phoning a few, couldn't get a response. After the first wave of Covid, I tried some more dentist numbers - none would answer. At least before Covid they answered, but despite what the website said, wouldn't take new NHS dentists. In November last year, 2020, I developed an abscess in a tooth. It was seriously painful. I tried phoning a couple of dentists - no one answered. Eventually the abscess went away. In January 2021 the tooth broke in half. I got some dentist recommendations from friends - checked the websites - they said they were taking NHS patients. But no one answered the call. I left a message, several. No one called back.

It now feels as if an abscess could be in my jaw, underneath the jawline where I have a half tooth - and I still can't get a dentist."

The impact of delayed treatment and lack of access

We are hearing how delayed/paused treatment and not having a dentist is affecting people in a number of different ways. Most commonly we are hearing about people being left in **considerable pain**, with the medication prescribed not being of much use. *"I have had an excruciating pain in my tooth and I cannot get to my dentist. I phoned NHS 111 and they were next to useless. There are no emergency dental appts. in this area. I contacted my GP surgery, they won't touch dental problems, they won't even prescribe antibiotic for a tooth abscess so what on earth am I supposed to do?? It's a disgrace having nothing in place for dental issues."*

People are also telling us how having no access to treatment is impacting on their general well-being and **mental health.**   *"My niece is 32 and lives with me. She had a pretty tough upbringing and for years used substances. Owing to this and from a history of violent relationships she only currently has five teeth. Since living with me she has been 7 months clean from substances and is working on her mental health but is struggling because of her teeth, not least because eating is hard and the teeth that she does have are becoming wobbly. She would really like to start thinking about*

college but she is so embarrassed about her teeth that it is affecting all areas of her life.

We have tried ringing so many dentists in Leeds but none are accepting NHS patients and we don't know what to do anymore. Katie is currently on benefits has and so can't afford to go private. I work in the charity so don't have a huge income either to be able to afford this."

"I've experienced a lot of pain with my teeth. I called NHS 111 and was not deemed to be eligible for an emergency appointment and was told to go to a dentist. I got a tooth pulled out privately as I couldn't wait any longer and have been in a lot of pain since. I was not aware that I could call up NHS dentists to get an emergency appointment. I now have 4 broken teeth and 1 tooth that has had a crown fall out. I've recently found out that my diabetes has an effect on my teeth and gums and has made things worse. My mental health has also been suffering."

"I contacted you a few months ago asking if there was any way of finding help to get into a dentist (it would need to be wheelchair accessible) I've tried every avenue I possibly can including asking my doctor to make a referral which she did and it was rejected, I'm in constant pain and getting abscesses continuously plus my teeth are literally falling out, I've lost 4 in the last couple months which included a big molar which I woke up choking having nearly swallowed it, I'm disabled with severe osteoarthritis and other ailments which makes me literally housebound but my daughter helps me lots with daily tasks and getting to and from hospital appointments, I'm on quite a lot of medications which includes numerous strong pain killers , I think my gums have receded as it feels like my natural teeth I have left have dropped much lower than they were, I have at present 3-4 very loose teeth and obviously this also affects what I can eat.. its also making my mental health suffer as it can make me extremely distressed... I've tried the nhs helplines and rang every dentist listed in Leeds and surrounding areas and can't find any willing to help."

There has been an increase in people telling us that Practices have been unable to see them as a NHS patient but they could pay for private care and be seen more quickly.

This is very concerning from a **health inequalities** perspective.

"This morning I received a letter from my dentist informing me that they are not going to see NHS patients anymore as of 1st June 2021 – they are becoming a fully private dental practice.

Since finding this out, I have spent the best part of the day (when I should have been working, might I add) searching for a dentist that is taking on NHS patients, and have been completely and utterly unsuccessful. I started close to home and when I got

nowhere, I started to go further afield – all to no avail. No-one is taking on NHS patients – even though many of their entries on the Find a dentist - NHS (www.nhs.uk)website imply that they do! One practice even told me that they have a waiting list of 3 years!

I am struggling/failing to find a replacement NHS dentist, and I hear that I am not alone – all of the NHS patients at this Practice are in the same boat as me, and from what I hear, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the task of finding an NHS dentist even more difficult/impossible than it was before countrywide. I, like many others, may be forced into trying (and "trying" is the operative word, here) to afford the payments for a private dentist, which could be crippling. I have been quoted many prices for private dental plans today ranging from £12 a month upwards – and that is before they even see you, and if you need work doing, the prices for work that needs to be undertaken is, in some cases, prohibitively expensive."

"We had to go private in order for our two children to be seen by a dentist (they hadn't seen the dentist for over 12 months by this point), which cost £100 in total (normally £200 but they had a 50% discount offer, which is why I decided to do it). This was for the privilege of just looking at our kids' teeth and not doing any cleaning or putting fluoride on their teeth. The reason why we had to do this is because our current dentist says that government restrictions mean that they can't see children. However, they were happy to see:

• my husband and I for hygienist appointments
• my husband to have a new bridge made and fitted
• my daughter (a child!) for a hygienist appointment

So it seems free NHS treatments, e.g. regular dental checks are unavailable, but where we have to pay, there is less of an issue. I know we are lucky because we could afford the £100 and many people don't have this money available. I am angry about it though because dental health of children in West Yorkshire is one of the worst in England and we need decent teeth in order to eat well and feel good about ourselves - it is a health and mental health issue as far as I'm concerned."

*"Unfortunately the waiting lists are so very long, let alone find one to go to now!
For example at I was told it is a 4 year waiting list but have left my name with them!
My nearest dentist has a 2 year waiting list. Sadly they won't even take my name to add to the list. Is there anything else I can do please or can you help me to at least get to see an NHS dentist as a one off to try help me with the teeth, gum problem I am having.*

I used to pay privately but sadly can't afford it anymore and due to ill health with a brain tumour, autoimmune condition and recent diagnosis of thyroid disease.

I am really struggling as cannot work either due to being in the Extremely Vulnerable category."

Confusion around what treatment is being offered

NHS England guidance states that patients can phone a local dentist for urgent care even if they have not been treated there before.

However, we have heard confusion about this – whilst dental practices don't have a patient list in the same way that GP practices do, people tell us that their local dental practice has cited 'not being registered' as a reason they cannot access an appointment. Nor have some been following the Standard Operating Procedure of offering a triage service to anyone that calls, so 111 has been the preferred route for people when trying to access emergency or urgent dental care. Even then people are unsure what is classed as emergency or urgent.

"My partner is suddenly losing all of his teeth and we need to register with a dentist in preparation for getting dentures. Tried to book an emergency appointment but as he is not in pain regarding his teeth, he could not get an appointment. He struggles to eat and his gums are in pain."

"For the past year I've been trying to find a new dentist. I ended up calling 111 to get emergency dentistry. I have multiple cracked teeth, broken teeth, need for fillings and gum disease. 111 only look at one issue at a time and because I have multiple tooth issues it would be too much to call 111 for each issue and get one sorted at a time. It would be better to go to a dentist who will look at and treat everything in one go and have a holistic approach."

"They went to the GP with a lump in their mouth which is uncomfortable. The GP told them to go to a dentist about the lump as dentists are specialists of the mouth. They told their GP that they are not registered with a dentist so they told them to call NHS 111 as it is very important that the lump is checked and not left unseen. When they called NHS 111 they said that the lump isn't deemed as an emergency because they weren't in extreme pain or have broken teeth etc. and was dismissed."

Clear and accessible information

Many of the people who contact Healthwatch have commented on the NHS website containing out of date information or that there is often out of date answerphone

information or that dentists websites can be confusing about what they offer (eg. Saying treatment is available but when contact is made this is only for private patients.

What have we done?

Local Healthwatch have regularly shared information and feedback with the Dental Commissioning Executive and have been in regular contact with the local NHS dental commissioners, often seeking advice on enquiries.

A number of local Healthwatch have recently met with local commissioners as we have felt that access to dentistry in the region is at crisis point.

Feedback has also been shared with Healthwatch England, local CCG's, the NHSE Chief Dental Officer, local and regional dental committees, British Dental Association, Public Health locally and nationally, NHS Business Services Authority and NHS 111/YAS.