

Healthwatch Hartlepool

Accessing Dentistry

Consultation Report

January 2022

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Executive summary

Hartlepool is one of the most deprived areas in England, ranked 18th out of 326 local authority areas and with 7 of the 12 wards in Hartlepool amongst the 10% most deprived in the country.

Healthwatch Hartlepool is committed to working collaboratively with all Local Healthwatch organisations across the North-East region and the people of Hartlepool to improve access to Dentistry services. At a time of increasing demand on services and pressures on funding, it is even more important to make sure we are shining a spotlight on all aspects of patient journey when accessing dentistry services both locally and regionally. As always, we are incredibly ambitious that services are delivered efficiently whilst targeting them towards those who need the most help. In Hartlepool, the areas where the most vulnerable members of our population live reflect the areas with the highest deprivation. For that reason, we have tried to ensure we have consulted with the whole population utilising our strong network of partners in addition to those within the voluntary and community network.

You will see from our findings that whilst services currently provided can be effective there is an overwhelming desire for dentistry services to return to some kind of normality as was prior to the Covid19 pandemic and that equal access for all communities is paramount.

We are mindful that our residents are our greatest asset and by consulting and working in collaboration with our Local Healthwatch partners across the whole of the North-East we may exert greater influence in improving access locally, regionally and nationally for dentistry.

Our consultation spanned the months of December 2021 and January 2022 and has been one of our most successful consultation exercises over the last 8 years.

“People’s views come first - especially those who find it hardest to be heard. We will champion what matters to the seldom heard and work with others to find solutions. We are independent and committed to making the biggest difference to residents.”

Christopher Akers-Belcher Chief Executive - Healthwatch Hartlepool

Background

Accessing Dentistry Consultation Report:

Throughout 2020 and 2021 Healthwatch Hartlepool was receiving feedback from the public, as were other Local Healthwatch (LHW) organisations in the Northeast, that accessing NHS dental services was very difficult, whether registering with an NHS dentist, getting treatment or even getting treatment at a dental hospital.

Initially during the latter half of 2020 and early part of 2021 Healthwatch Hartlepool conducted our own #BecauseWeCare survey in line with Healthwatch England and the results confirmed that 11% of all respondents viewed dentistry to be an area of concern. Whilst the percentage seems relatively low this was still the 3rd highest area highlighted by the cohort of residents who replied to our town wide survey.

It also appeared that, even prior to Covid, NHS dentists were only funded to cover 50% of the population. With the need to now have lull time in the consulting room between patients due to Covid safe guidelines there is no longer the capacity within the system to meet this target, let alone deal with the backlog of appointments that didn't go ahead due to the lockdown.

Healthwatch Hartlepool seized the opportunity to work collaboratively with several Local Healthwatch partners across the North East as collectively we agreed that there is a need for better access, but it needed surveying and reporting both locally and on a regional basis.

Aim of study

To determine whether accessing NHS dental services is being raised by a few people having a problem or whether it is a more widespread issue.

As a comparison Healthwatch Hartlepool also contacted all Dentistry practices within the borough to form a view of how they were serving the people of Hartlepool with accessible appointments and treatment.

Findings

Finding a dentist

- Number of survey responses for this activity - 114
- When these experiences took place - December 2021 & January 2022
- Breakdown of Ratings on how easy it was to find a dentist -
Only 20 people responded to this question 17 (85%) said very difficult and 2 (10%) said easy.
- What respondents did to find a dentist - 21 respondents
 - 17 (81%) people rang around dentist
 - 13 (62%) Searched the internet
 - 9 (43%) Looked on NHS Choices website
 - 8 (38%) Asked family and friends
 - Only one respondent contacted Healthwatch Hartlepool
 - 2 (10%) did something different
- Breakdown of kind of dental service whether NHS or private - 22 respondents
 - 17 (77%) NHS
 - 1 Private
 - 4 (18%) Both
- Whether looking for help with a particular dental issue - 21 respondents
 - 18 (86%) Yes
 - 3 (14%) No
- Did they find a service to meet their needs? - 20 respondents
 - 5 (25%) Yes
 - 15 (75%) No
- How far they travelled to receive this service - 16 respondents that varied greatly
 - Only 6 respondents were able to access a dentist within the Borough
 - 1 travelled a 70-mile round trip to Newcastle
 - 5 people could not access service due to lockdown or unable to get an appointment
 - 4 other people accessed out of town dentistry service
- Did they use any services other than their dentist to help get advice about accessing dental care? - 19 respondents
 - 6 (32%) contacted NHS111
 - 2 (11%) contacted their GP
 - 3 (16%) contacted a pharmacy
 - 10 did not use any other service
- Was there anything that would have improved the experience of trying to find a dentist? - 17 respondents

Actually, finding a dentist to take care of the problem - Able to register with a dentist in Hartlepool for NHS treatment - Yes being able to find one - Finding one! - Hartlepool needs more NHS dental care but just dentists in general - A website updating us on the situation and where we could go - Information available on local dentists accepting NHS patients - Need more NHS dentist in Hartlepool. This is a regular problem and has got worse year on year - yes, actually finding one! - I am still not registered with an NHS dentist as whenever I have looked non are available - Being able to get into any NHS practice, even if there was a wait. In an ideal world there would be an online calendar where you could see availability or be able to switch between practices - more NHS dentists - Finding an NHS dentist to access - I would like to be able to find one - need more of them -

If I had been able to access the dentist that I am registered with - ability to find dentist that is currently accepting NHS patients - Giving the option to be placed on a waiting list. Which dentists are taking on NHS and the price list involved as they are all different? Being able to book dentists on-line instead of having to call loads of numbers to receive the same message no NHS patients only private. Which I don't understand as there must be space if this is what is being offered.

Routine check-up

- Number of survey responses for this activity - 39
- Breakdown of responses between “You”, “your child” & “other”
 - “You” - 32 (82%)
 - “Your child” - 4 (10%)
 - “other” - 3
- Breakdown of Ratings on how easy it was to book a routine check-up appointment - 38 respondents
 - 10 (26%) Very difficult
 - 8 (21%) Difficult
 - 4 (11%) Fair
 - 6 (16%) Easy
 - 10 (26%) Very easy
- Whether looking for help with a particular dental issue - 38 respondents
 - 7 (18%) Yes
 - 31 (82%) No
- Breakdown of responses to statements around happiness of timescales - 35 respondents
 - 15 (42%) - I was happy as I got an appointment within a reasonable timescale
 - 10 (29%) - I was happy that I got an appointment, but I had to wait longer than I would have liked
 - 10 (29%) - I was unhappy because even though I got an appointment, I had to wait too long
- Breakdown of ratings on overall experience - 35 respondents
 - Terrible - 6 (17%)
 - Poor - 5 (14%)
 - Fair - 5 (14%)
 - Good 7 (20%)
 - Excellent - 12 (35%)
- Breakdown of whether any further care or treatment were needed - 38 responses
 - 13 (34%) Yes, a follow up appointment with my dentist
 - 1 (3%) Yes, a referral to another service
 - 24 (63%) No
- When this experience was - 21 responses of which 2 were 2 and 3 years ago, 4 were between March and December 2020 and the 15 were during 2021
- Breakdown of NHS and private appointments - 39 respondents
 - NHS - 32 (82%)
 - Private - 3 (8%)
 - Both NHS and Private - 4 (10%)
- Was this the same dentist that was used prior to the start of the pandemic - Yes from all 39 respondents

- Breakdown of responses as to whether respondents needed to seek private appointments due to not being able to find NHS appointments - 2 (5%) yes and 37 (95%) no
- Suggestions of improvements - 16 responses - 11 people made suggestions per below and 5 people suggested no improvements needed/required.

Should have restarted appointments once they had the capacity. Used their text service to inform people that this had happened and would be contacted in due course and that you would not be taken off the books - Being told of the charges. I work part time on minimum wage (doesn't matter that I am married and hubby on good wage) - If they had contacted me to remind me of my check up as they have always done - Quicker times and longer appointments where treatment such as scale and polish included in the check-up rather than a separate appointment - Reassurance that during a pandemic, there is a practice to return to and register grandchildren at same practice - Everything. The whole system is not working as it should - Maybe if the dentists weren't only working at 65% of capacity for so long! I understand this was the guidance, but because I have attended regularly for many years, it seemed to be unnecessary to have to wait so long this time - No always excellent service - Being able to ring and get a person rather than going online which is taxing as I would have to use my phone to do this - Getting into a new dentist, there is none in Billingham, Stockton, Middlesbrough or Hartlepool - Getting rid of fear

Appointment for a minor treatment

- Number of survey responses for this activity - 16
- Breakdown of responses between “You”, “Your Child” & “Other”
 - “You” - 13 (81%)
 - “Your Child” - 2 (12%)
 - “Other” - 1 (7%)
- Breakdown of Ratings on how easy it was to book an appointment for a minor issue - 16 respondents
 - Very difficult - 6 (38%)
 - Difficult - 2 (12%)
 - Fair - 1 (6%)
 - Easy - 3 (19%)
 - Very easy - 4 (25%)
- What were the minor issues and were they in pain? 16 respondents

My tooth cracked and it was uncomfortable as it was very sharp - Tooth filling - Lost veneer - brace check - Two replacement fillings discomfort (no pain) - Gold inlay had come out and needed to be refitted, I had to wait for quite a long time, I was honest with dental practice and said it wasn't painful, there would be others with much worse issues - Crown came off - Lost filling causing and ached 24/7 - A crown - I had a cracked tooth which was causing me discomfort - broken tooth - Filling came out. I was in pain, but it was manageable - my son had an infection on the roof of his mouth and the doctor advised it needed to be seen by a dentist -teeth cleaning - I had a chipped tooth and it was causing discomfort - loss of filling, transient pain

- Breakdown of responses to statements around happiness of timescales - 14 responses
 - 5 (36%) - I was happy as I got an appointment within a reasonable timescale

- 4 (28%) - I was happy that I got an appointment, but I had to wait longer than I would have liked
- 5 (36%) - I was unhappy because even though I got an appointment, I had to wait too long
- Breakdown of ratings on overall experience - 15 respondents
 - Terrible - 2 (13%)
 - Poor - 1 (7%)
 - Fair - 4 (27%)
 - Good - 5 (33%)
 - Excellent - 3 (20%)
- Breakdown of whether any further care or treatment were needed - 15 respondents of which 7 had a follow-up with same dentist and 8 that required no further treatment.
- When this experience was - 11 responses 4 from 2020 and 7 from 2021
- Breakdown of NHS and private appointments - 15 responses and all were NHS
- Was this the same dentist that was used prior to the start of the pandemic? - 15 responses and 12 said Yes. 1 was a referral from NHS 111,
- Breakdown of responses as to whether respondents needed to seek private appointments due to not being able to find NHS appointments - 15 respondents of which only 2 (13%) said yes.
- Suggestions of improvements - 6 replies albeit 2 said no improvements required. Other comments:

Better lines of communication - just the wait times and availability of dentists willing to actually offer you an appointment - To be seen much quicker - much wider availability of NHS dentistry

Urgent Appointment

- Number of survey responses for this activity - 13
- Breakdown of responses between “You”, “Your Child” & “Other”
 - “You” - 10 (77%)
 - “Your child” - Nil
 - “Other” - 3 (23%)
- Breakdown of Ratings on how easy it was to book an appointment for an urgent appointment - 13 respondents 6 said very difficult, 1 said easy and 6 said very easy.
- What was the urgent treatment for and levels of pain - 12 responses

My 4-year-old granddaughter had fallen at school and slacked her two front teeth and badly bruised her gums - Hole developed in crown - Broken tooth - Filling had fallen out resulting in tooth ache and headaches - A broken Molar and loss of amalgam filling - Broken denture - no pain - but lack of teeth! Denture was repaired, but a tray of dentures was dropped in the repair centre, and new dentures and appointments had to be made - needed extraction - broken tooth, extreme pain - very painful needed the tooth out - Broken tooth - Broken tooth which needed a crown - very painful dental abscess

- Breakdown of responses to statements around happiness of timescales - 13 respondents
 - 7 (54%) - I was happy as I got an appointment within a reasonable timescale

- 1 (8%) - I was happy that I got an appointment, but I had to wait longer than I would have liked
- 5 (38%) - I was unhappy because even though I got an appointment, I had to wait too long
- Breakdown of responses to - Were you offered self-help advice for your urgent issue whilst waiting? 13 responses - 5 (38%) Yes - 8 (62%) No
- Breakdown of responses to - Were you given clear information about who to contact and what to do if the situation got worse? 11 responses - 6 (55%) Yes - 5 (45%) No
- Breakdown of ratings on overall experience - 13 respondents
 - Terrible - 4 (31%)
 - Bad - 2 (15%)
 - Fair - Nil
 - Good - 2 (15%)
 - Excellent - 5 (39%)
- Breakdown of responses to - Did you access any follow up treatment after your emergency dental appointment? 13 respondents
 - Yes, from my dentist - 5 (38%)
 - Yes, referred to another service - 2 (15%)
 - No, I could not access the follow up I needed - 2 (15%)
 - No, I did not need follow up - 4 (31%)
- When this experience was - 11 respondents - 2 relate to 2020, 2 ongoing and 7 relate to 2021
- Breakdown of NHS and private appointments - 13 respondents - 8 NHS, 4 Private and 1 both.
- Was this the same dentist that was used prior to the start of the pandemic? 13 responses 9 (70%) stating Yes
- Breakdown of responses as to whether respondents needed to seek private appointments due to not being able to find NHS appointments - 13 respondents of which 2 (15%) said Yes with the remaining 9 (85%) saying No
- Breakdown of responses to Have you called NHS111 for emergency dental care since March 2020? - 13 respondents of which 2 (15%) said Yes with the remaining 9 (85%) saying No
- Suggestions of improvements - 8 responses albeit 4 suggested no improvements or praised the care they received.

That the dentists in the Hartlepool area show some humanity and be prepared to make time to see an injured child - Prompt dental treatment as I wanted this issue resolving before the Festive Period - Very basic - Should have been directed to a dentist in Hartlepool and been examined not sent to Middlesbrough where I had to get my daughter to drive me there as I had been taking codeine for the pain and then given a script from the dental practice she then had to drive to another chemist to collect the antibiotics given on script as we don't know Middlesbrough area it was a very difficult journey freezing cold pouring rain and dark luckily she has satnav on her phone to direct us

Treatment at a dental hospital

- Number of survey responses for this activity - 1
- Breakdown of responses between “You”, “your Child” & “other” - “You” 1
- Breakdown of responses best describing the situation - “I was given an appointment at a dental hospital”.

- Breakdown of Ratings on how easy it was to book an appointment at the dental hospital - 1 - Very easy
- What was the hospital treatment for and levels of pain - Removal of Wisdom tooth
- Breakdown of responses to statements around happiness of timescales - “I was happy as I got an appointment within a reasonable timescale”.
- Breakdown of responses to - Were you offered self-help advice for your issue whilst waiting? 1 - No
- Breakdown of responses to Were you given clear information about who to contact and what to do if the situation got worse? 1 - Yes
- Breakdown of ratings on overall experience - Good
- Breakdown of responses to - Did you access any follow up treatment after your dental hospital appointment? 1 - No
- When this experience was - September 2021
- Breakdown of NHS and private appointments - NHS & Private

Is there anything else you want to tell us about dental services? - 40 respondents

If a practise will take on private patients (there is room for that) then why can't they take on NHS patients? Paying extra for the same level of care. Not acceptable.

The difficulty of registering with a dentist for NHS treatment is extremely difficult in Hartlepool. I have recently managed to register with an NHS dentist but will have to travel to Billingham.

I would go private if they don't push you, but I feel like they push you. Plus, pricing can be extortionate. We need more NHS services such as this in Hartlepool.

My daughter has had a baby in lockdown and hasn't had a check-up for nearly 3 years.

I'm the only one in my family who has been able to get into an NHS dentist.

There appears to be a shortage of local dental surgeries accepting NHS patients. Also, where patients are registered there is also a shortage of appointments. Even when an appointment is urgently required there is a necessity to wait. It appears that there only solution is to pay privately even with a surgery where you may be registered.

Positive experience - COVID restrictions and asking patients to arrive just before the appointment time reduce the time I had to wait to be seen - Dentist was on schedule on all but one visit.

Initial appointment making isn't a positive experience, customer care is poor from reception staff. Dental care and customer care is very positive from the actual dentist.

I was kept informed by email throughout the pandemic that there would be a delay in my check-up. but had no urgency. Therefore, I knew I was not forgotten. I had a routine check-up as soon as it was possible.

Dental services in Hartlepool were stretched before the pandemic. It has been difficult to get appointments for a number of years now. I have family that have had to pay an extraordinary amount of money for treatment because they were in pain and needed to be seen quickly. There are too few NHS dentists available.

Fast efficient and safe covid treatment.

The Practice had put very safe covid measures in place and I felt safe and comfortable - I have been back for 2 check-ups and hygiene treatment since.

Is there anything you want to tell us about any other health and care services? - 13 respondents

The responses covered predominantly access to GP appointments. Patients tend to want face to face appointments and waiting times as well as general access is poor. One person claimed there is poor health care provision within the LGBTQ community, 1 person highlighted long waiting times for NHS physio appointments and 2 praised the NHS provision including NHS111.



Analysis of findings

Healthwatch Hartlepool concludes that the feedback they have gathered from their research work is both rich and meaningful. The survey work has been one of the most successful consultation exercises we have undertaken and to gather such insights into how people feel across Hartlepool should set the benchmark for the crafting of any future operating model around dentistry that can be efficiently and fairly afforded to current or future patients.

Residents simply want equity of access but feel the priority is being given to private patients. When patients do access services, they are predominantly happy with the service & treatment they have received but remain with poor expectations in accessing timely appointments as and when required.

Responses from Dentistry Practices in Hartlepool

All 10 practices in Hartlepool were contacted with our survey and only 5 responded. We made it very clear in our contact, which was by telephone and subsequent emails that we wanted to hear from the dentistry practices direct regarding their view of how people in Hartlepool are being affected. This was critical to give a broad comparison with feedback from patients and across the region. Below are the questions we posed together with the limited responses we received:

1. "Is the Practice currently accepting new NHS patients for treatment?"
 - **Yes 1 (children only)**
 - **No 4**
2. "What is the approximate waiting time for new NHS patients to have routine dental treatment i.e., routine checkup and/or scale and polish?" *No need to read out the options, just ask the question. If they answer on the timescale boundary, choose the shorter timescale e.g., if they reply "2 months" tick the 'Between 1-2 months' option*
 - **Less than 1 month (Please state how long) - Few days for the 1 respondent**
 - **Between 1-2 months**
 - **Between 2-3 months**
 - **Between 3-6 months**
 - **More than 6 months (Please state how long_____)**
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?" *(Tick all that apply)*
 - **ask about a patient's symptoms before allocating an appointment - Nil**
 - **ask about a patient's level of pain before allocating an appointment - 1**
 - **appointments allocated on a first come, first served basis - Nil**
4. "Is the Practice currently seeing private patients?"
 - **Yes - 2 of the five respondents**
 - **No (If 'No' go to Q7)**

5. “Do you offer a private appointment if there are no remaining NHS appointments?”
 - **Yes - 1 respondent**
 - **No - 1 respondent**
6. “What is the approximate waiting time for new private patients to have routine dental treatment i.e., routine checkup and/or scale and polish?” *No need to read out the options, just ask the question. If they answer on the timescale boundary, choose the shorter timescale e.g., if they reply “2 months” tick the ‘Between 1-2 months’ option*
 - **Less than 1 month** (*Please state how long - 1 respondent said with 1 week and 1 said within 2 weeks*)
 - **Between 1-2 months**
 - **Between 2-3 months**
 - **Between 3-6 months**
 - **More than 6 months** (*Please state how long _____*)
7. “If you have no appointments available, do you ever signpost to other dental practices?”
 - **Yes - Only 2 respondents - 1 said ring other practices & 1 said ring 111**
 - **No**
8. “How has Covid-19 affected your provision of NHS funded services?” 2 responses

1 said that the dentist would need to answer and the other said “Diaries are inundated with emergency/urgent appointments, some of whom have not attended in many years and have high dental needs. We are having to priorities these over other patient appointments and recalls and as such there is a large backlog of patients to see putting pressure on the service.
9. “Is there anything else you would like to tell us?” 1 respondent

“We have been an Urgent Dental Centre during the pandemic, meaning we have been able to see non-registered patients in emergencies under the NHS. There has been dedicated time in our diaries for this. The private appointments we offer are outside of our NHS contracted hours or completed by dentists without an NHS contract at the practice.”

Methodology

Healthwatch Hartlepool launched a town-wide survey and supplemented their intelligence gathering by information direct from all dentists across Hartlepool. We utilised our network across Hartlepool to promote the survey including the Covid Champions Network and Health Scrutiny.

- 119 responses were received from people or practices that took part in our survey work. We had 114 respondents from our on-line survey and five surveys were completed through our direct contact with dentistry practices.
- The town-wide survey was made available via survey monkey albeit hard copy surveys were made available for those digitally excluded. Unfortunately, we believe the prevalence of the latest Covid 19 variant and prevalence of infection meant we had no surveys completed other than those on-line. The survey was promoted by Healthwatch Hartlepool's social media and complemented by promotion through the Council's networks.
- All research was undertaken within the months of December 2020 and January 2021.

Demographics

Please see Appendix 1 which demonstrates our research is representative of Hartlepool's local communities.

Next steps

Healthwatch Hartlepool will use the insight gathered from our consultation to help shape our future work programmes. We will submit our results to the North-East Local Healthwatch Network as part of the regional work, which will result in a broad view report covering the whole region. We shall also seek to present our findings to Hartlepool's Health & Wellbeing Board and request those findings are utilised as a strong evidence base within the Council's Audit & Governance committee when they are undertaking their Health Scrutiny investigation into accessing services.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone that has helped us with our consultation for 'Accessing Dentistry Consultation Report' including:

Members of the public who shared their views and experiences with us

All our amazing staff and dedicated volunteers

The organisations that significantly contributed to our work and focus groups

Hartlepool 50+ Forum

Hartlepool Borough Council

AND The North-East Local Healthwatch Network for giving us the opportunity to undertake this research.

Appendix 1

Demographics - 79 Respondents

| 1. Age category | Participants |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| 13 - 17 years | 0 |
| 18 - 24 years | 3 |
| 25 - 34 years | 5 |
| 35 - 44 years | 11 |
| 45 - 54 years | 28 |
| 55 - 64 years | 18 |
| 65 - 74 years | 8 |
| 75+ years | 5 |
| I'd prefer not to say | 1 |

| 2. Gender | Participants |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| Man | 27 |
| Woman | 51 |
| Intersex | 0 |
| Non-binary | 0 |
| Other | 0 |
| I'd prefer not to say | 1 |

| 3. Ethnic background: | Participants |
|---|--------------|
| Arab | |
| Asian / Asian British: Bangladeshi | |
| Asian / Asian British: Chinese | |
| Asian / Asian British: Indian | |
| Asian / Asian British: Pakistani | |
| Asian / Asian British: Any other Asian / Asian British background | |
| Black / Black British: African | |
| Black / Black British: Caribbean | |

| | |
|--|----|
| Black / Black British: Any other Black / Black British background | |
| Gypsy, Roma or Traveller | |
| Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Asian and White | |
| Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Black African and White | |
| Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White | |
| Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background | |
| White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh | 72 |
| White: Irish | |
| White: Any other White background | 4 |
| Another ethnic background | |
| I'd prefer not to say | 1 |

21 people declared they had a long-term health condition, 51 said not and 4 preferred not to say.

7 people declared they had a disability, 70 said not and 1 preferred not to say.

11 people said they were carers, 64 said not and 2 preferred not to say.