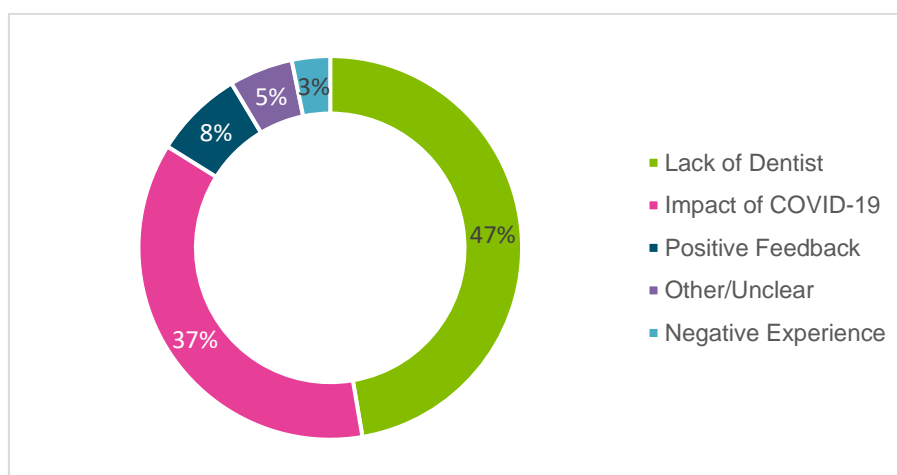


Dentistry briefing – February 2021

This briefing focuses on dentistry, which once again has featured prominently in national media due to work of Healthwatch England, and a topic we at Healthwatch North Yorkshire have been raising for several months now – including as the focus of our October briefing.¹

Since the beginning of February last year (3rd February 2020 – 3rd February 2021), we received 89 pieces of feedback regarding dentistry. Increasing from 7.38% to 11.27% of contacts on the rolling 12 months' basis since our last review in October. The findings of the feedback review conducted in October are still relevant, with the situation only deteriorating further.

A lack of an NHS dentist still accounts for the majority of the dentist-related inquiries we receive, relating to nearly half. The impact of COVID-19 – generally in regards to cancelled appointments – has increased to over a third of our dentistry feedback and signposting, compared to around a quarter at the time of our review in October.



We have received more positive than negative feedback of people's experiences (seven versus three), which is a positive sign. When people have been able to access their dentist, they have been happy with the PPE and treatment. Although this accounts for less than a 12th of the dentistry feedback we have received over the 12-month period.

Concern of children's oral health

We've heard from seven people regarding a lack of access to regular NHS dentist appointments for their children.

Person rang to find out if and how they can complain about their NHS-dental service, with which their family have registered. Their kids' check-up appointments have been cancelled, and they have not had an appointment since September 2019. They are highly concerned about the oral health of their children as they are 4, 7, 9-years old and are going through some significant changes.
- phone, anonymous, Ripon, December 2020

Dental decay can cause pain, sleepless nights, days off school,² and is the top causes of childhood hospital admission for five to nine-year-olds.³

¹ (Link to the October briefing)

² PHE. 2017. [Health Matters: Tackling Child Dental Health Issues at a Local Level](#).

³ LGA. 2016. [Tackling Poor Oral Health in Children: Local Government's Public Health Role](#).

Emergency appointments available

Despite COVID-19 severely reducing routine appointments for NHS dental patients, members of the public are still able to receive an emergency appointment if needed. However, we have heard from one caller about being asked to travel significant distances, and we are concerned about the costs for people on low incomes.

Person rang to complain about not being able to get an emergency dental appointment as a new NHS patient locally in Scarborough. They recently moved into Scarborough and were advised to ring 111 for booking the emergency treatment. However, NHS 111 offered a slot in Harrogate but the person is not able to afford to travel that far. They say they are in pain and not getting any support at the moment.

- phone, anonymous, Scarborough, November 2020

Private favoured over NHS patients

Over an eighth of our dentistry feedback indicates a growing frustration at a perceived two-tier dental system between private and NHS patients. Whilst we hear about regular appointments being cancelled for NHS patients, callers have told us that private appointments are still going ahead.

We are a family of four and all our appointments have been moved only to be cancelled on several occasions. Now we have been put on a waiting list. My employer goes to the same dental practice, has the same dental surgeon but pays into a private plan and none of his appointments have been cancelled.

I get that this is part and parcel of paying for the privilege but he will be attending his second appointment shortly if the current restrictions are eased whilst myself and family still haven't had a date to replace the first appointment cancelled since the beginning of this pandemic. If I could afford private I would, wouldn't we all like to have that luxury.

- email, anonymous, Selby, December 2020

One caller told us that they contacted 15 dental practices, they were unable to be accepted as a new NHS patient, however most had available appointments on a private basis. That members of the public cannot get registered as an NHS patient, but are offered a private appointment, indicates that dentist practices have capacity and the problem lays with funding.

Key messages:

- People are still struggling to register for an NHS dentist.
- COVID-19 continues to cause delays to NHS dental treatment.
- Increasing concern around the dental health of children whose regular appointments have been cancelled due to COVID-19 and not been rearranged.
- A growing frustration that private patients are accessing routine appointments when NHS patients cannot. Many people cannot afford the cost of private treatment.
- Emergency provision does seem available, but these may be too far for some people to travel.
- Members of the public attempting to register as an NHS patient are often not even being offered to go on a 2-year waiting list anymore.
- Members of the public seeking to register are often offered to go private and be seen earlier: indicating that dentists do have capacity for treatment, but the NHS is not utilising this potential.