

**Experiences of NHS Dental
Services Across South Tees**



March 2022



**Freephone:
0800 118 1691**

Contents

About Healthwatch South Tees.....	3
Executive Summary	3
Introduction.....	4
Methodology	5
Survey Findings: Members of the Public	6
1. Finding a dentist	7
2. Routine check-ups	11
3. Appointments for minor issues	14
4. Urgent appointments.....	16
5. Treatments at a dental hospital.....	20
Survey findings: Dental practices.....	22
Telephone and email feedback.....	27
Conclusions.....	27
Next Steps	28
Acknowledgements	29
Appendix 1: Demographics.....	30

About Healthwatch South Tees

Healthwatch South Tees (HWST) is the operating name for Healthwatch Middlesbrough and Healthwatch Redcar and Cleveland.

We are the independent champion for people using local health and social care services.

The role of Healthwatch is to listen to what people like about services and what they think could be improved and to share these views with those with the power to make change happen.

We also share views with Healthwatch England, the national body, to help improve the quality of services across the country. In addition, Healthwatch provides an Information and Signposting service to help ensure that people receive the right health and social care services locally.

Executive Summary

Healthwatch South Tees wanted to understand the experiences of their community with dental care services during the period from the first lockdown in March 2020 to December 2021.

Healthwatch England is at the forefront of campaigning for reform of the NHS dental contract alongside the British Dental Association (BDA). Healthwatch South Tees has joined forces with seven other local Healthwatch teams to inform the regional picture as well as support the national picture and inform local service providers of the experiences of their patients.

The findings in this report highlight that for those who are unable to find an NHS Dentist there are limited options. Treatment can only be accessed in emergency situations through NHS 111. Routine check-up appointments and preventative care is not available.

Although the backlog and ongoing restrictions continue to cause problems when it comes to booking routine care and accessing emergency treatment, most people can still access these services although they may have to wait longer than was previously experienced.

Improvements could be made by ensuring the NHS Choices website contains up-to-date information regarding the availability of dentists, provides supportive advice to patients who are on waiting lists and, a greater awareness around the 'registration of dentists' and information relating to NHS Dentistry.

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 collaborated 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 rumors relating to NHS dentistry.

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>).

The NHS dental sector has also faced significant challenges during the pandemic and have required to comply with a national standard operation procedure and infection prevention control measures, which has resulted in NHS dentistry operating at significantly lower levels of capacity.

It is important to note that in the period July to December 2020, practices were delivering 20% of normal activity volumes, increasing to 45% by the end of March 2021. From April 2021 the minimum expectation was at least 60% of normal activity by the end of September 2021, increasing to 65% for the period October to end of December 2021.

There has been 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 South Tees, have seen a significant increase in people's concerns around seeing a dentist.

Nine 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			
Darlington	Gateshead	Hartlepool	Newcastle
North Tyneside	Northumberland	Middlesbrough	Stockton on Tees
Redcar and Cleveland			

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 nine local Healthwatch teams detailed in the 'Introduction' section. This report highlights the feedback from across South Tees.

Healthwatch Northumberland coordinated the project and has produced a combined report, this has been shared with the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (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 was launched on 29 November 2021, which focused on:-

- Accessibility of appointments
- Experiences of treatment
- Difference between accessing NHS and private dental appointments

It was distributed through our networks, our HWST Community Champions, key stakeholders and partners. We also promoted the survey through local radio stations, social media platforms, Local Dentistry Committee (LDC) and directly with dental practices.

The closing date for the survey was 7 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 appointment and
- Treatment at a dental hospital

We asked about experiences happening throughout the COVID-19 pandemic commencing March 2020 to January 2022. The questions were drafted by Healthwatch Northumberland, agreed with the collective nine local Healthwatch teams, and tested with volunteers.

We received 105 responses to the Healthwatch South Tees survey.

Survey for local dental practices

During the same period, November 2021 to January 2022, we contacted 14 dental practices across South Tees with a series of questions to understand the availability of services.

Public information campaign

The collective Healthwatch teams involved worked with Local Dentist Committees, Public Health and the Commissioners (NHS England) to develop an information campaign to inform people about getting dental care.

Work on this campaign began in December 2021 and was 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.

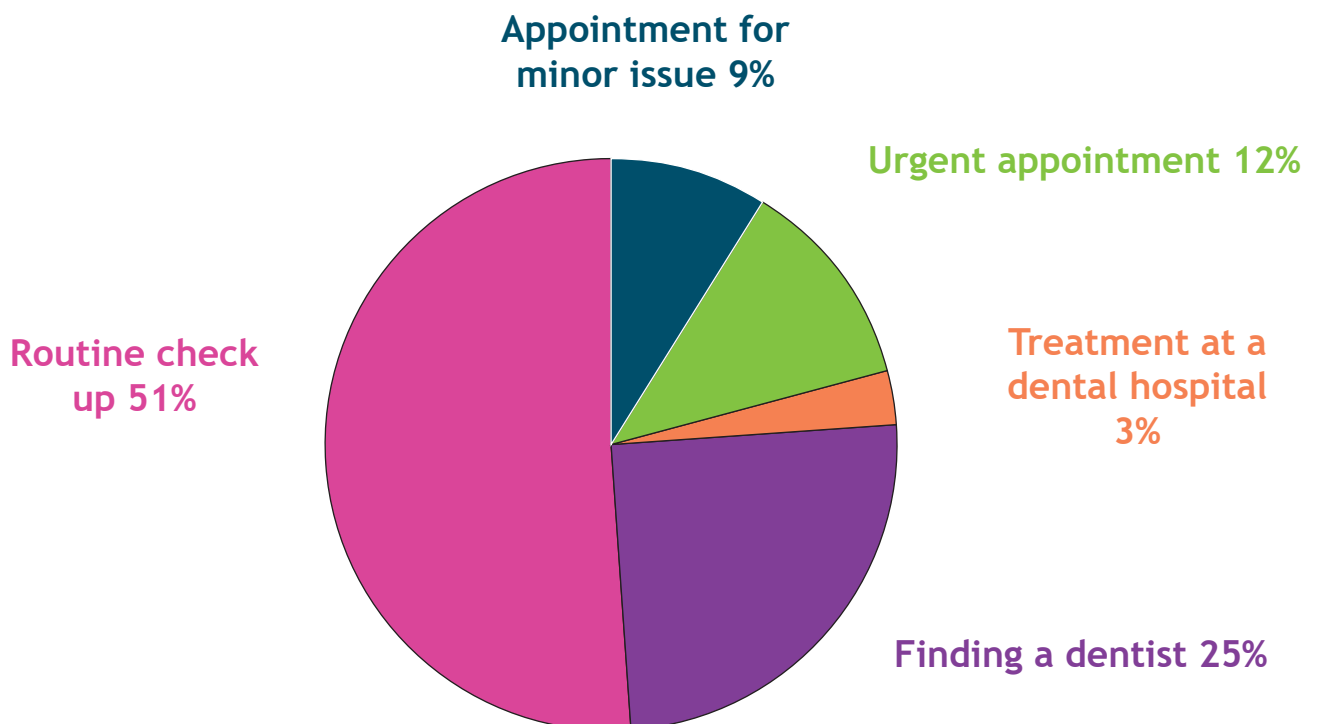
It gives the facts about being registered with a practice, why you may be offered a private appointment, capacity for routine appointments and, what constitutes urgent care.

The leaflet can be accessed here:

[Healthwatch Middlesbrough](#) or [Healthwatch Redcar & Cleveland](#)

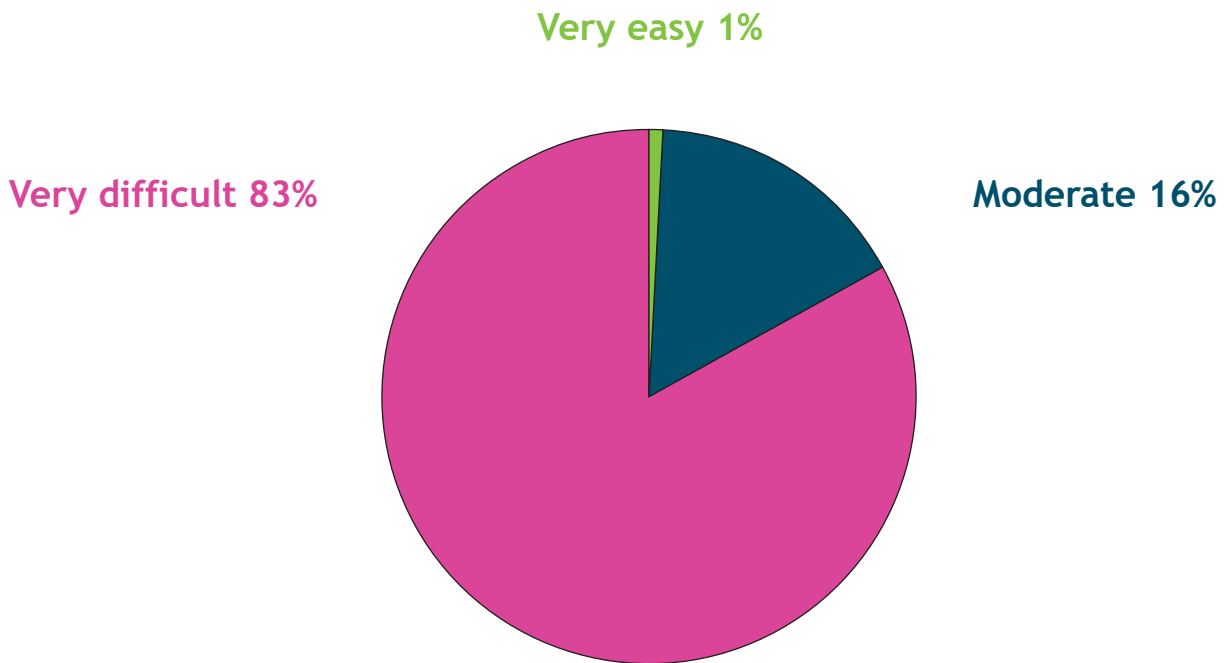
Survey findings: Members of the Public

We had 105 respondents to our survey. A breakdown of responses to each section can be found below.

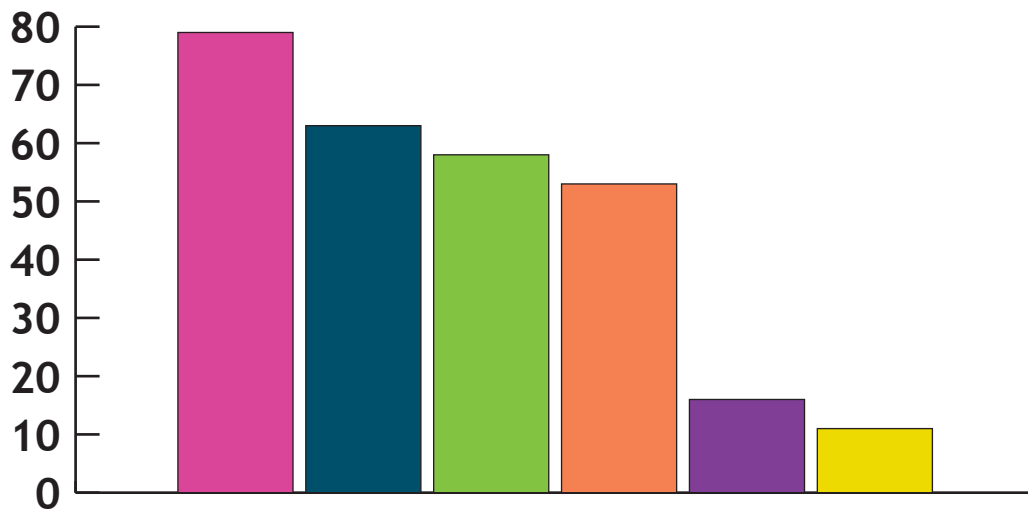


1. Finding a dentist

1. How easy was it to find a dentist?



2. What did you do to find a dentist? (respondents could choose more than one option)



Ring around dental practices 79%

Search the internet 63%

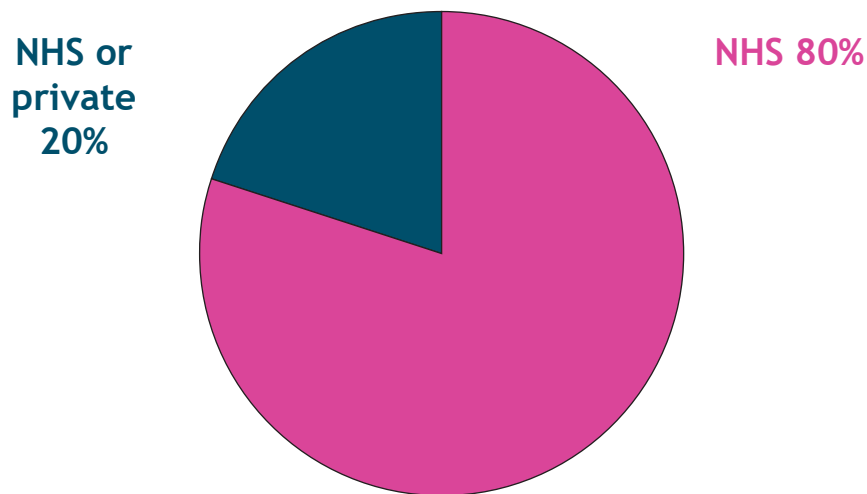
Look on NHS choices website 58%

Ask family/friends 53%

Contact local Healthwatch 16%

Other 11%

3. What kind of dental service were you looking for?



4. Were you looking for help with a particular dental issue?



65% of respondents said they were looking for help with a particular issue.

The reasons varied greatly and many were experiencing pain and/or required urgent treatment. Comments included:-

‘Lost front crown’

‘Orthodontist for my child’

‘My tooth had discolored and has since chipped, then eventually broken away’

‘Pain, significant abscess requiring antibiotics and then root canal’

‘Broken molar tooth, immense pain’

‘Infected wisdom tooth, immense pain’

5. Did you find a dental service to meet your needs?



60% of respondents were unable to find a service to meet their needs

Many of the comments expressed the frustration of practices not taking on new patients and some people had to resort to private treatment.

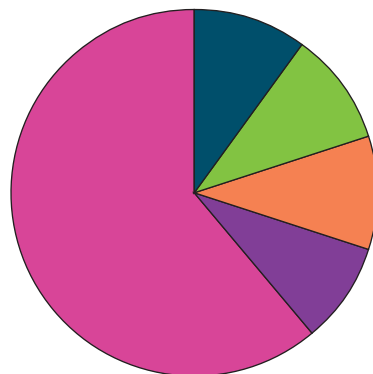
‘I contacted over 20 practices, and searched as far as an hours drive away. I eventually managed to get in to one locally for emergency treatment as they’d had a DNA, but was unable to register there for appointments’

‘Yes, I did but only privately’

‘I finally found a dentist that was willing to take me on as a private patient’

6. Have you used any services, other than your dentist, to help you get advice about accessing dental care? Respondents could select more than one response.

NHS 111
61%



I did not use
another service 10%

Another service 10%

Pharmacy 10%

GP 9%

7. Is there anything else that would have improved your experience of finding a dentist?

‘More government funding of NHS dental services’

‘NHS website not up to date - re NHS availability’

‘I just believe they are understaffed and over stretched’

‘Re-registering my son even if they said appointments would not be possible at the beginning’

‘Yes, dentists taking on patients’

‘Yes, one closer to me’

Key points

Of those who shared this experience, **80%** expressed the view that this was very difficult and **60%** were unable to find a dentist to meet their needs.

Information on the availability of dentists was poor too, with information on NHS websites not up to date regarding availability.

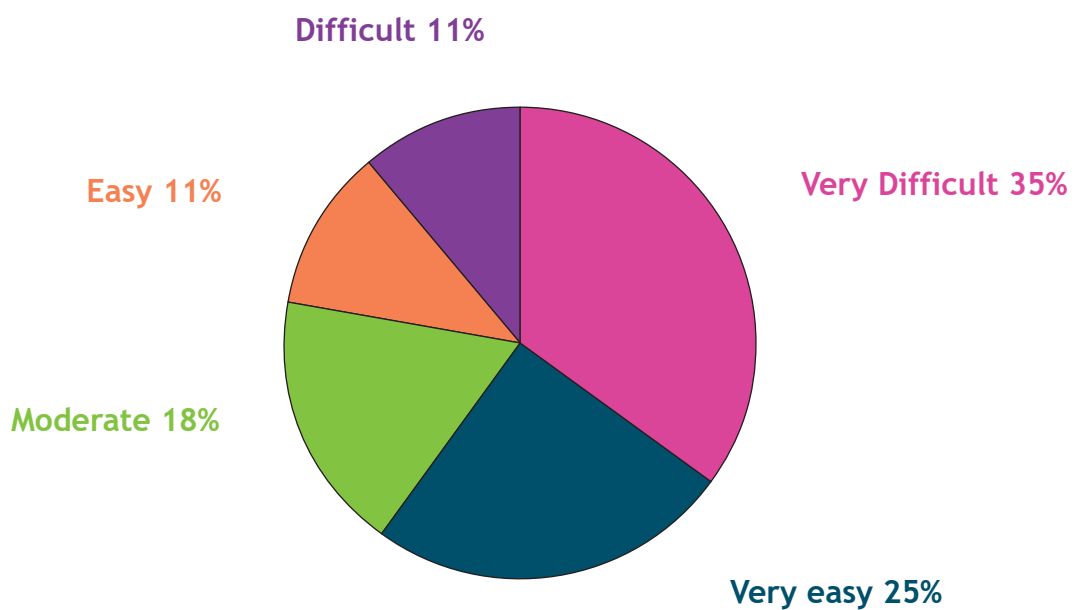


2. Routine check-ups

Of those who responded to this section:-

- 83% wanted to tell us about their own experiences
- 17% said 'other'

1. How easy was it to book a check-up appointment?



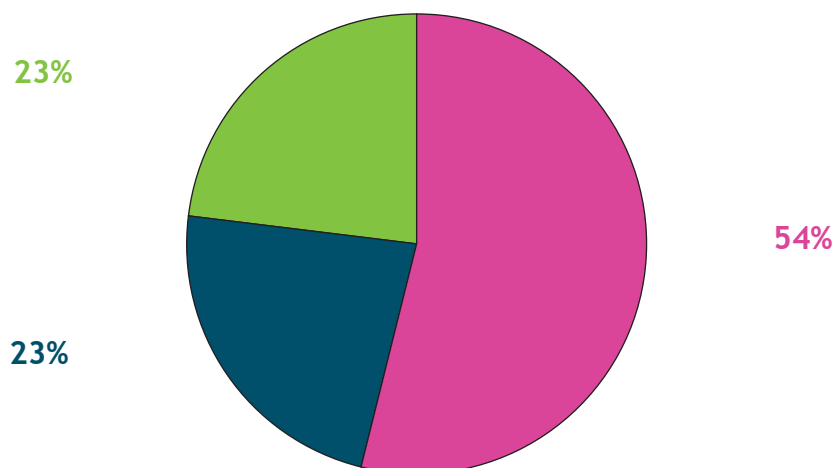
2. Were you looking for help with a particular dental issue?

17% of respondents said they were looking for help with a particular issue

'Issue with filling falling out - I still haven't been able to book an appointment and I'm in pain'

'Check-up due November, text message received to make an appointment, but no appointments until March 2022'

3. How happy were you with the timescale of appointments?



Pink - I was happy I got an appointment within a reasonable timescale

Blue - I was happy I got an appointment but I had to wait longer than I would have liked

Green - I was unhappy because even though I got an appointment, I had to wait too long

4. Rate your overall experience



Comments included:

‘Information on the website has not been updated since the beginning of the first lockdown. They don’t respond to emails, and I haven’t been able to get through by phone. I don’t want to be too much trouble as I don’t have an urgent issue but would like to know when they will catch up with routine check-ups. I am also concerned that I am still on their register as a patient.

Service from my dentist is always excellent and the practice has kept me updated throughout the pandemic about the status of their service and how to obtain help if needed.

5.

44%

required a follow up appointment with their dentist

6.

90%

of these appointments were NHS related

7.

100%

of respondents used the same dentist as before the pandemic

8.

4%

of respondents had to seek private dental treatment because they couldn't get an NHS appointment

9. Is there anything that would have improved your experience of getting a check-up appointment?

'Caring and considerate reception staff - very rude, arrogant, and condescending when asking about appointments. Keep cancelling appointments when we have one booked 6 months in advance. Dentists seems to have taken a back seat in the pandemic - cannot understand how they can refuse treatment to the point where teeth fall out'

'Some up to date information and reassurance that I'm still registered with them'

'Having an idea of timescales or a future appointment booked in'

'Advice and guidance on what to look out for during pregnancy. I understood teeth are more at risk of issues during pregnancy but didn't have the support'

'Consideration that I have seen a teen who's teeth were in need of braces before the pandemic and also a child with SEND who needs extra support with dental needs'

Key points

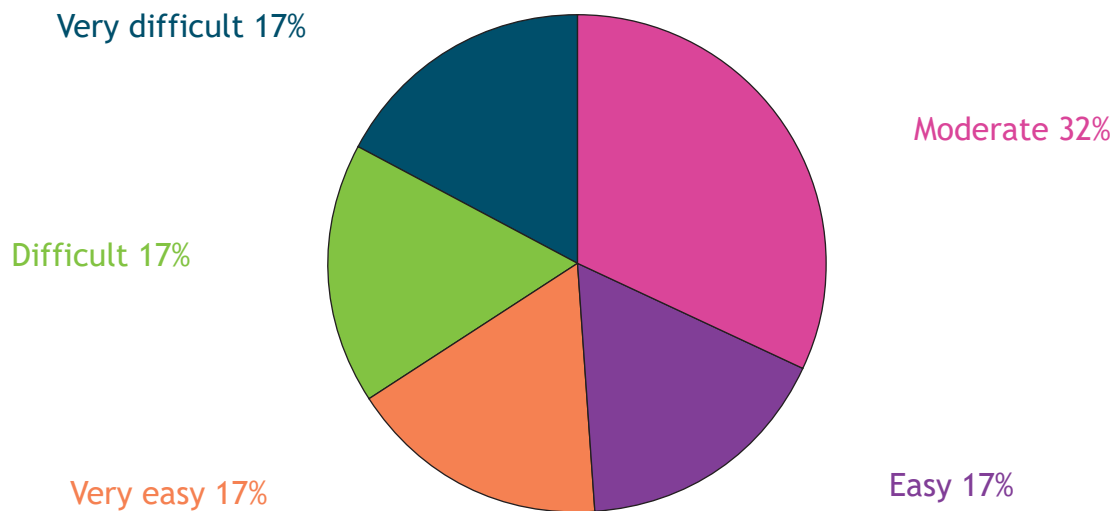
Those booking appointments for a routine check-up were able to do so at the same dentist they used prior to the pandemic. Although 35% expressed that they found this very difficult, 54% were happy they got an appointment in a reasonable timescale and 35% rated their overall experience as excellent.

Of those who responded, 44% required follow up treatment. Suggestions for improvement included more flexible appointments for working patients and being offered phone advice.

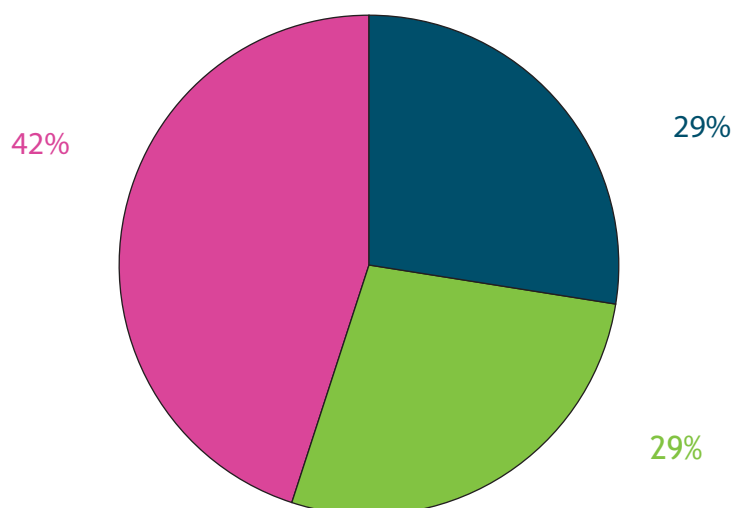
3. Appointments for minor issues

All responses to this section were the respondents' own experience

1. How easy was it to book an appointment for a minor dental issue?



2. How happy were you with the timescale of the appointment?



Blue - I was happy as I got an appointment within a reasonable time scale

Pink - I was happy I got an appointment but had to wait longer than I would have liked

Green - I was unhappy because even though I got an appointment, I had to wait too long

3. Rate your overall experience



4. Was any further treatment needed?



of respondents required a follow up appointment with their dentist.

5. Was this appointment NHS or private?



said 'NHS'

said 'private'

said 'both'

6. Was this the same practice you used before the pandemic?



said 'yes'

said 'other'

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

All respondents said 'no'

8. Was there anything that would have improved your experience of getting a check-up appointment?

'At a time when all medical issues seem to be appointment only, I would not expect to wait an excessive amount of time in an area when the wearing of face coverings was blatantly being flouted'

'Perhaps by adding another dental practitioner and to be able to get an appointment'

Key points

Experiences on how easy it was to book an appointment for a minor issue varied greatly with **33%** reporting an average experience. Whilst **16%** found it very difficult, a further **16%** found it very easy.

Of those who responded, **43%** expressed that they were happy they got an appointment but had to wait longer than they would have liked.

4. Urgent appointments

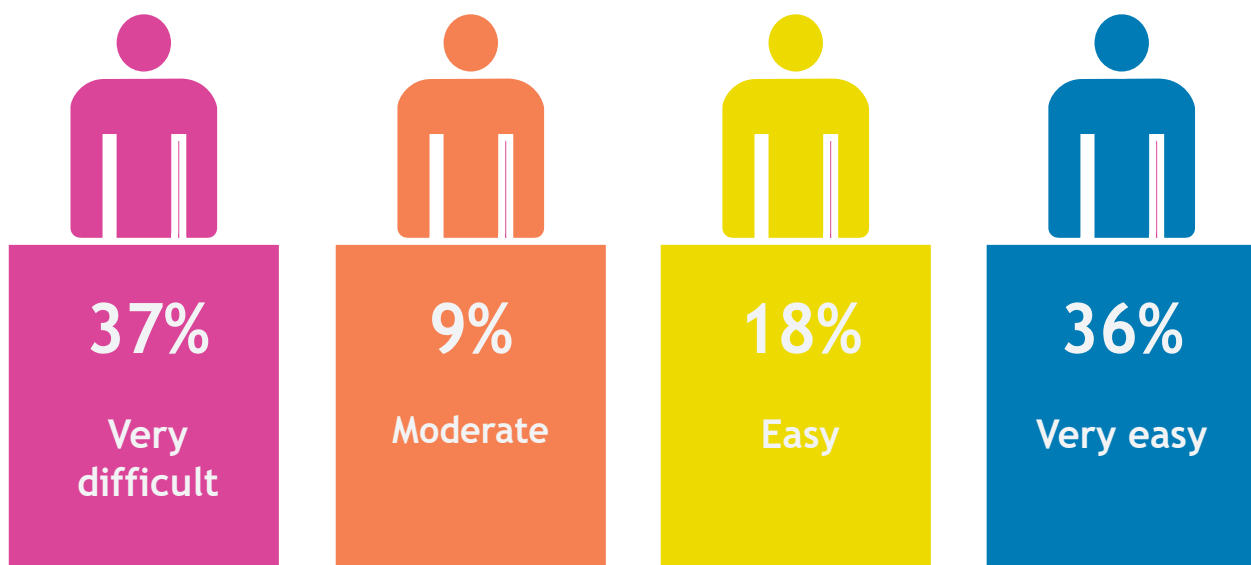
Of those who responded to this section...

73% wanted to tell us about their own experiences

18% said 'other', and included responding on behalf of their spouse, and another on behalf of a patient in their care

10% wanted to tell us about the experiences of their child

1. Rate how easy it was to book an urgent appointment



2. What was the urgent dental issue you needed treatment for? Please tell us the severity and if you were in pain.

‘Jaw pain and restricted jaw movement’

‘I knew I had a hole in a back upper molar. I wasn’t in constant pain but it was uncomfortable and could only get worse’

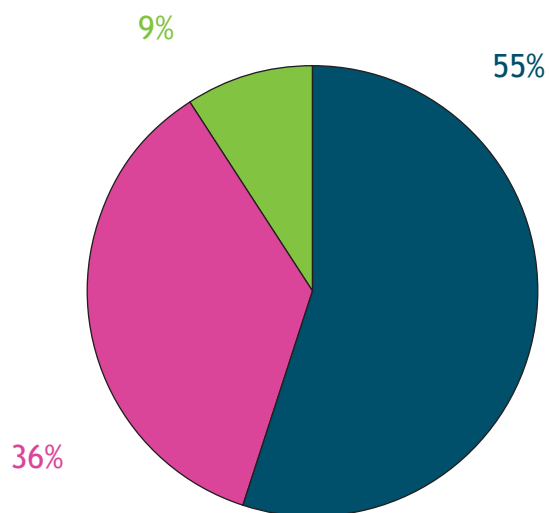
‘I cracked a back tooth on a popcorn kernel and could not find an emergency appointment for weeks. I tried ringing different surgeries and 111 but it wasn’t any help. I was in pain, but also very concerned about further damage while left untreated’

‘Severe dental pain going on for 7 days’

‘Snapped tooth and chronic pain’

‘Husband had toothache and was in severe pain’

3. How happy were you with the timescale of appointments?



Blue - I was happy I got an appointment within a reasonable timescale

Pink - I was happy I got an appointment but had to wait longer than I would have liked

Green - I was unhappy because even though I got an appointment, I had to wait too long

The range of how long respondents waited for an urgent appointment varied from within the hour to 4 weeks.

One patient was told to register in September, which at the time, was over 12 weeks away before they could be seen.

4. Were you offered self-help advice for your urgent issue whilst waiting?



55% of respondents said they were offered self-help advice

'I was given pain relief and measured up for a bite guard'

'I was told to use sensitive toothpaste and a filling kit'

'I was advised by the 111 team to purchase a temporary filling substance and apply until I could get an appointment. This felt very sketchy and not something I would expect to do in modern Britain'

5. Were you given clear information about who to contact and what to do if the situation got worse?



said
yes

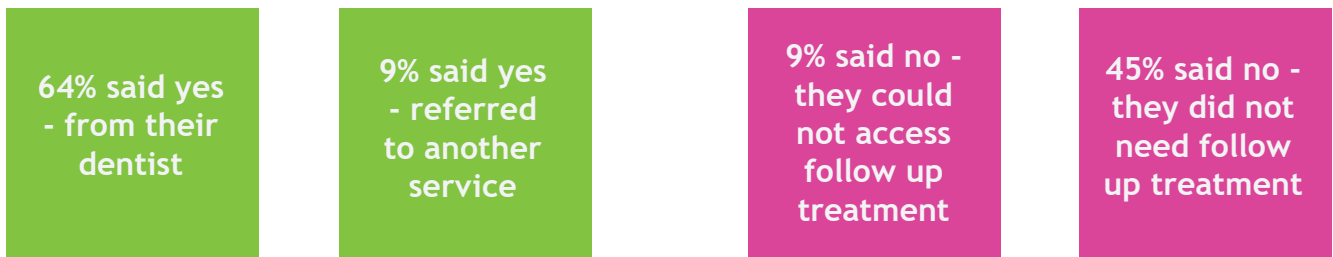


said
no

6. Rate your overall experience



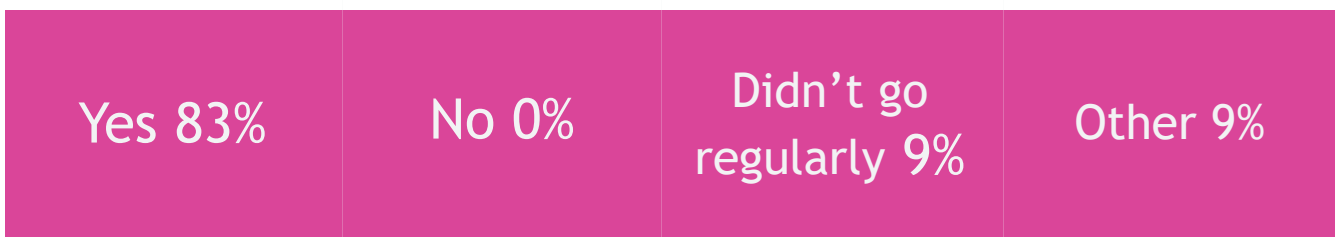
7. Did you access any follow-up treatment after your urgent dental appointment?



8. Was this appointment NHS or private?



9. Was this the same dentist you used before the pandemic?



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



11. Have you called NHS 111 for emergency dental care since March 2020?



12. Is there anything that would have improved your experience of urgent dental care?

‘I think another x-ray should have been taken’

‘Dentists (and doctors) being a bit more humane and realising they are a service provider’

‘Having actual access to an emergency care option’

‘Having appointments available in an emergency’

‘I was very impressed by the level of COVID security at the time, plus their willingness to get me in for the help I needed’

‘To get through on the phone quicker’

Key points

Experiences on how easy it was to book an urgent appointment varied greatly with **33%** reporting an average experience. Whilst **16%** found it very difficult, a further **16%** found it very easy.

Of our respondents, **43%** expressed that they were happy they got an appointment but had to wait longer than they would have liked. Suggestions for improvement included improved access for urgent appointments.

5. Treatment at a dental Hospital

3%

of respondents told us about treatment at a dental hospital

50%

wanted to tell us about their own experience

50%

wanted to tell us the experience of their child

1. Which of the following best described the situation?



2. Rate how easy it was to book treatment at a dental hospital.



3. What was the dental issue you needed treatment for? Please tell us about the severity and whether you were in pain

‘Extraction of baby teeth prior to brace being fitted - very anxious child’

‘My discoloured, then chipped and now eventually cracked tooth’

4. Were you happy with the timescale of appointments?

50%

were happy as they got an appointment within a reasonable timescale

50%

were unhappy because even though they got an appointment, they had to wait too long

5. Were you offered self-help or advice for your issue whilst waiting?

No
50%

Told us
'more'
50%

'111 told me to take
a paracetamol'

6. Were you given clear information about who to contact and what to do if the situation got worse?

Yes
50%

No
50%

7. Rate your overall experience.



50%
Terrible



0%
Satisfactory



0%
Good



0%
Very good



50%
Excellent

8. Is there anything that would have improved your experience of an appointment at a dental hospital?

‘I have 3 children and my husband works away. It would have been more convenient for me if I could have attended my local trust for treatment. I had to involve other people to help with school runs during a pandemic which was a challenge at the time’

‘Empathy would be nice, but truth be told, there’s not a genuine ounce of compassion left in the sector. Money is all that matters to dentists’

Key points

We received very few responses to this section with respondents having very different experiences. Key issues were location and timing of appointments.

Survey findings: Dental practices

We contacted 14 dental practices across South Tees with a series of questions to understand the availability of services. The dental practices who responded were easy to contact, with minimal waits for the phone to be answered and they were happy to answer questions.

The general response was how busy the dental surgeries were and the frustration of not being able to offer more appointments.

One dentist practice informed us they have reduced their lunch breaks as a team as they are so busy and have stopped seeing private patients and another practice is working through a backlog of 10-11 months of patients.

Nine dental practices responded to this survey

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



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

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

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?

'Ring 8.30 for an emergency appointment. Triage system'

'Triage form. Also see emergency appointments with non-registered patients'

'Prioritise on level of needs'

'We have 3 dentists and each keep 2-3 emergency appointments per day, on a first come first served basis'

'Triage system for appointments. If you ring at 8am for emergency, then you are seen that day'

'If routine next available appointment. If emergency / pain offered appointment within 24 hours'

'Triage based on symptoms. If patients ring at 8.30 for appointments, we have pain slots. We also see patients who are not registered with us as a one-off emergency appointment'

'We use the NHS triage system. We have a pain list for appointments which includes children, severe swelling, pain and will get an appointment on the day. We also have a cancellation list'

'Triage - pain and swelling same day'

4. Is the practice currently seeing private patients?

Yes
5

No
4

'We have stopped seeing private patients to work through the backlog'

'Yes we are a private practice. We only see children on the NHS'

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

Yes
4

Yes
2

N/A
3

'Private and Denplan are options available'

'Yes, but it would still be a long wait'

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

Time period	Responses
Less than 1 month	2
Between 1 - 2 months	2
Same as NHS patients	2
N/A	3

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

All practices commented on how COVID has affected their capacity to see patients.

'We see approx 5-6 emergency appointments per day due to cleaning etc. Prior to COVID it was 40 appointments per day'

'We stayed open, but due to down time and cleaning, we see less patients now than prior to COVID'

'Extremely busy. We can't see as many patients due to cleaning, PPE etc.'

'Procedures take longer due to cleaning etc. We shut from March to June and when we re-opened we were very busy'

'Logistics of cleaning fallow time, not having people in and out same time. We are back up to seeing 30-40 patients per day again as we did prior to COVID'

'COVID has affected how many patients we can see due to cleaning, appointments etc.'

'COVID has massively affected how many people we can see. Our waiting room used to be packed, we used to see 25/30 patients and now its 7-10 due to cleaning and time needed for each appointment'

'Very busy trying to get through our backlog resulting from COVID. If people ring up and haven't been sent a reminder, we are booking them in to be seen'

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

Yes
5

No
4

'If no emergency appointments are available, we advise to ring around other surgeries'

'We work later to fit them in, as a team we have agreed to have a shorter lunch break to try and reduce the backlog'

'We are a private practice, so people have come to us as they want to have the treatments as opposed to waiting for NHS treatment'

'We suggest patients ring around other surgeries and then 111'

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

‘It’s difficult as we want to offer appointments when people are in need but its so busy’

‘We have heard that some dentists haven’t seen patients during COVID but are then using the fact they haven’t been in to the practice as a reason not to see them and then can’t register anywhere - as everywhere is so busy’

‘It can be difficult when a patient calls 111 and they are told that they need to be seen within 24 hours. However, when a dentist does their own triage they might not assess as needing an appointment within 24 hours and this can lead to frustrations for patients’

Telephone and email feedback

In addition to the survey since April 2021 we have received 31 enquiries to our Information and Signposting service from people who have been unable to register with an NHS Dentist across South Tees.

As a local Healthwatch we have found this challenging as, in most instances, we have been unable to provide effective signposting that will resolve the problems people are facing.

This has been particularly evident with people requiring urgent dental treatment who find they are no longer registered with the dentist they thought they were, and no other dentists are taking on NHS patients.

One desperate patient resorted to getting private treatment at a cost of £1600, the NHS equivalent charge would have been £80.

Conclusions

The findings within this report highlight that whilst there are good experiences of dental care across South Tees, general feedback indicates that staffing shortages, and historic concerns within the dental system, are adversely impacting on public dental health.

In addition, health and safety measures implemented during the pandemic to ensure the continuation of services, which are still in place, are leading to delays in treatment.

There are some clear indicators of areas where improvements could be made including:-

- Ensuring NHS Choices website provides ‘real time’ up to date information.
- Improve NHS 111 advice and information.
- Dental Practices need to improve the communication of advice to patients who are on waiting lists and often in discomfort.

Improved communication for patients to raise awareness of current circumstances, changes in service delivery and priority pathways.

One of the most concerning findings of the report is the limited options open to people who are unable to register with a dentist for preventative or urgent treatment.

Of those who responded to this section, 60% were unable to find a service to meet their needs, with some having to resort to private treatment.

Next Steps

Healthwatch South Tees will share this report with Healthwatch Northumberland, Healthwatch England, Public Health South Tees, LDC and key local stakeholders.

Collectively and individually, we will use our findings to:

- Influence the 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](#).
- Maintain our support to service users encouraging them to interact and share their views directly with providers.
- Continue to nurture new relationships to keep up to date with changes in order to provide the most current response to our Information and Signposting contacts.
- Await the issuing of National Guidance and National Dental System Reforms which is expected from July 2022 onwards that will have an impact on how dentists deliver their services in the future.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank:

- Members of the public who responded to our survey and shared their experiences to help improve services.
- Dental practices who took part in our survey.
- Our Community Champions and strategic partners who helped us to promote the surveys.
- Colleagues in other local Healthwatch who we worked with to create and deliver this project.
- NHS England Public Health

Appendix one: Demographics

1. Age category	Participants
13-17 years	0
18-24 years	0
25-34 years	15
35-44 years	12
45-54 years	11
55-64 years	11
65-74 years	5
75+ years	0
Prefer not to say	1
Did not answer	

2. Gender	Participants
Man	10
Woman	44
Intersex	0
Non-Binary	0
Other	0
Prefer not to say	1
Did not respond	

3. Ethnic Background	Participants
Arab	0
Asian / Asian British: Bangladeshi	0
Asian / Asian British: Chinese	0
Asian / Asian British: Indian	1
Asian / Asian British: Pakistani	0
Asian / Asian British: Any other Asian / Asian British background	0
Black / Black British: African	1
Black / Black British: Caribbean	0
Black / Black British: Any other Black / Black British background	1
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	46
White: Irish	0
White: Any other White background	2
Another ethnic background	0
Prefer not to say	3
Did not respond	

4. Carer, long term health condition, disability	Participants
Yes, I consider myself to be a carer	16
Yes, I consider myself to have a disability	7
Yes, I consider myself to have a long-term condition	16
None of the above	
I'd prefer not to say	5

5. Carer	Participants	
Yes	8	17%
No	24	50%
Prefer not to say	0	

healthwatch

Middlesbrough

www.healthwatchmiddlesbrough.co.uk
Freephone: 0800 118 1691
Email: healthwatchsouthtees@pcp.uk.net
Text only: 07451 288 789
Twitter: @HwMiddlesbrough
Facebook: facebook.com/HwMiddlesbrough

healthwatch

Redcar and Cleveland

www.healthwatchmiddlesbrough.co.uk
Freephone: 0800 118 1691
Email: healthwatchsouthtees@pcp.uk.net
Text only: 07451 288 789
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