What we're hearing about dentistry June 2023 – May 2024

The big picture

Access to NHS dental care continues to be one of the main issues that Healthwatch England hear about; communities across England have made it clear that NHS dentistry is not affordable and accessible. Healthwatch England are calling for long-term fundamental reforms to NHS Dentistry.

Nationally, there have been a number of short-term interventions aimed at increasing NHS capacity. We have also heard from NHS leaders working locally to increase NHS dental capacity where possible, particularly in areas that are particularly affected.

In Surrey, residents have been sharing their experiences with Healthwatch Surrey.

Who have we been hearing from?

95 people across Surrey have shared their experiences of NHS dental care in the last year. Whilst residents across all districts and boroughs have shared their experiences, themes across Surrey have remained consistent. Residents of Reigate and Banstead have shared more experiences than any other area (11%), followed by Spelthorne (9%) and Epsom and Ewell (9%) and Guildford, Elmbridge and Woking (8% each).

- **62%** of those we heard from were aged over 50.
- **49%** of people were female.
- **12%** of the people feeding back were from a non-white ethnic background (52% were white and 36% preferred not to share ethnicity)

How did we hear?

Nearly half of the feedback (**49%**) we've received has come from our visits in the community at local foodbanks, community groups (including a homeless drop in, in Redhill) and local libraries.

About **40%** of the experiences come from people proactively contacting Healthwatch Surrey, Healthwatch England or via the Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service. The remainder has come via our other Luminus engagement events, hearing from unpaid carers and those affected by substance use.

What did we hear?

Key Themes

- People can't find a dentist accepting NHS patients.
- Information about dentists accepting NHS patients is not up to date.
- There is confusion around treatment covered by the NHS and charges for NHS dental care.
- There are financial barriers to receiving dental care.

How do I find a dentist?

Roughly half the people leaving feedback about dentists told us they had no NHS dentist or were trying to find an NHS dentist. Many were proactively contacting the Healthwatch Surrey Helpdesk to ask for information and advice on finding one. People told us they had no dentist for a variety of reasons:

- They had moved/changed area/circumstances had changed and couldn't find a local dentist.

  > "I registered with this practice a few years ago as a private patient (and had treatment and paid accordingly) as they were not accepting NHS patients at the time. I am now pregnant and eligible for free NHS dentistry. On the NHS website it states that this practice is currently accepting new NHS patients. So, I contacted them and asked whether I

could be moved from private to NHS patient and they said I couldn't. I enquired as to why given that they are supposed to be taking in new NHS patients and they said that if I were completely new to the practice they would accept me but they couldn't change my status from private to NHS. I don't understand how they can justify this and would be grateful for some advice on whether I should raise a formal complaint."
220456, Woking resident

- During visits in community settings, we found people told us quite simply that they don't have an NHS dentist (but they need one).
- We have been signposting people to Dental Choices, but for most people we spoke to, finding an NHS dentist has been hard to do.

"The person I support is unable to access an NHS dentist. She needs a local NHS dentist to support her after extensive dental surgery in hospital, can you refer her?" [Signposted the person to dentalchoices.org, but she had already Googled NHS dentists and had no luck. She said the site is outdated, and she has telephoned all dentists and none are taking on new patients.]
193722, Support Worker via IHCA, Waverley

- Many people had given up searching for an NHS dentist and now had no dentist as they couldn't afford to register for private dentistry. Those who have sought private treatment tell us they find it difficult to afford it.

"I've been trying to find a local dentist who will take on NHS patients. Most have a waiting list for a wait of over 6 months so I have to suffer or will end up having to pay private but really can't afford it. So what am I meant to do?"
205992, Mole Valley resident

"My dentist is private - what's the point in trying to get an NHS one, they all charge you."
209770, Mole Valley resident

- Many told us they had called multiple dentists who were listed as accepting NHS patients, only to be told of long waiting lists or that they were no longer accepting NHS patients.

> "Have just checked the dental practices in the Guildford/ Woking Area, not one is taking on over 18's as NHS patients. What a mockery."
> **210707, Woking resident**

- In some cases, something had changed at a person's dental practice and they were told they were no longer registered as an NHS patient leaving them without routine dental treatment.

> "My NHS dentist is about to take all of their services private. I was sent a letter saying I have the choice of either joining their payment plan or trying to find another NHS dentist. There aren't any others locally and it's frustrating as I have been going to this practice for years. I don't feel this is very fair."
> **201918, Spelthorne resident**

I receive NHS dental care but....

From those who had told us that they had a dentist, we heard some positives around care.

> "The dentist on the high street near me is great [Together]. They see us for check-ups and kept us on as NHS patients when a lot of my friends are complaining they are now private patients and have to pay."
> **195217, Spelthorne resident**

Confusion around charges and eligibility for NHS dental care

However, some people told us they are confused about charges for treatment and which dental treatments were eligible under NHS care.

"I have recently moved to Hersham, and I was struggling to find an NHS dentist, but then I was able to find a fairly local dentist that was taking NHS patients. When I registered myself and my wife, I did so as an NHS patient that receives free dental care, as we receive pension credit. When we registered, we provided the surgery with copies of the exemption certificates, and other relevant information that would mean we would not be charged. However, when we went to book in for an appointment, we were told we would need to pay privately for care. We had to pay £30 for a standard appointment, £85 for my wife to see a specialist and we had to pay £200 upfront to be registered. My wife has a root canal that needs treatment, and we are concerned that we are not going to be able to afford treatment."
192997, Elmbridge resident

"As someone who is currently exempt from dental charges, I have been told that I need to have root canal treatment. Unfortunately, this is to rectify an existing root canal that has become infected. My NHS dentist states that this cannot be done as an NHS patient and I will have to have this done privately. Are you able to offer any clarity on whether my prescribed treatment (root canal) would be covered under the NHS?"
206734, Surrey resident via Healthwatch England

Financial barriers

People often refer to financial concerns in relation to dental treatment and access. This is perhaps not surprising in light of recent data from the General Dental Council which found that 19% of dentists provide only private care, with no NHS, and a further 14% said they worked predominantly (over 75% of their time) in private care.

"In August 2023 I retired. I stopped receiving ESA [Employment and Support Allowance] and got my pension. What I didn't realise was on that day, I stopped getting free dental treatment. I have an abscess in a tooth under a

bridge, my dentist quotes £960 for treatment. I have been on benefits for over 30 years as I am disabled. I cannot afford this. I can't believe that because I'm retired, I'm no longer entitled to free dental treatment. I do not know what to do, I have an abscess in my mouth and cannot get treatment. I'm so angry I worked for 20 years as a nurse and can't get care now. Despicable. Ageist oppression."

211787, Surrey resident via Healthwatch England

About Healthwatch Surrey

Healthwatch Surrey champions the voice of local people to shape, improve and get the best from NHS, health and social care services. As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure decision makers listen to the experiences of local people.

We passionately believe that listening and responding to local people's experiences is vital to create health and social care services that meet the needs of people in Surrey. We seek out people's experiences of health and care services, particularly from people whose voices are seldom heard, who might be at risk of health inequalities and whose needs are not met by current services. We share our findings publicly and with service providers and commissioners to influence and challenge current provision and future plans.

We also provide reliable and trustworthy information and signposting about local health and social care services to help people get the support they need.

Committed to quality

We are committed to the quality of our information.
Every 3 years we perform an audit so that we can be certain of this.

We are proud to be commended in the National Healthwatch Impact Awards, recognising our work helping to improve local NHS and social care. You can view our video highlighting how feedback has enabled us to make positive changes to health and social care services.

Luminus

The Healthwatch Surrey service is run by Luminus Insight CIC, known as Luminus.
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