

**Access to an NHS dentist in  
County Durham**

How easy is it for patients to get treatment with an NHS dentist?

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## About us

### Healthwatch County Durham



This report has been produced by Healthwatch County Durham. We are an independent organisation whose aim is to help people get the best out of their local health and social care services, whether it's improving them today or helping to shape them for tomorrow. Everything we say and do is informed by our connections to local people and our expertise is grounded in their experience.

As a statutory watchdog, our role is to ensure that local decision makers put the experiences of people at the heart of their care so that those who buy (commissioners) and provide our services (NHS Trusts, GPs, the voluntary sector and independent providers) can benefit from what people tell us.

The Healthwatch network consists of 152 Healthwatch organisations across each of the local authority areas in England. It also has a national body called Healthwatch England based in London.

## Summary

This report has been written in response to many people contacting Healthwatch County Durham (HWCD) regarding the difficulties they were experiencing accessing an NHS dentist appointment. As well as working with stakeholders regionally, all the information we gather is shared with Healthwatch England and is used to enable them to show the national picture with stakeholders.

At the Healthwatch County Durham annual event in November 2021, Pauline Fletcher, the Dental Commissioning Lead North East and North Cumbria provided an update on the current position, including a lot of useful information about the NHS dental contract.

This report focuses on the current situation in County Durham, regarding accessing appointments and waiting times.

Out of a possible 54 dental practices the researchers spoke to 42 and asked a set of 7 questions. The questions were based on NHS appointment availability, availability of emergency treatment and accessibility. They are analysed in more depth later in the report.

The answers have given a clear picture that Country Durham has a similar situation to other counties in England. It shows that most Dental Practices are full and therefore cannot treat new patients. The exception to this in some cases, was children. From the practices that responded 35 could not take any new registered NHS patients, but 3 would register children only. A further 4 answered yes without clarification on whether it was adult or children’s registrations. However, emergency dental care for unregistered NHS patients was available in all practices.

<p>We rang 54 dental practices in County Durham and were able to speak to a member of staff in 42 practices</p> 	 <p><b>83%</b> of dental practices we spoke to are not registering new NHS patients</p> 
 <p>Every dental practice we spoke to was providing emergency dental treatment</p>	<p>Is there something you would like to tell us about dental treatment in County Durham?</p> <p><u><a href="#">Contact us</a></u></p> 

The provision of up-to-date information on the NHS “Find a dentist” webpage is inconsistent and causes frustration for patients who use it’s information to contact dental practices. NHS England currently send regular reminder emails, prompting practices to update their information with an easy access link included in the email. One of our recommendations is to make it a formal requirement for NHS dental practices to regularly update their information.

We also noted there were significant numbers of patients who failed to attend their appointments. This varied from practice to practice, with some stating that sending reminder calls and texts reduced the problem.

## Introduction

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we have seen a substantial increase in the number of people asking us for help or telling us about their experiences of trying to access NHS dental care.

Currently dental practices are working with a reduced number of appointments due to the infection control protocols that remain in place under the government guidance. Despite this, the advice to patients remains the same:

- You *do not* need to be registered with a dental practice to access NHS treatment
- In a dental emergency, you can call any NHS dentist and asked to be triaged for an emergency appointment
- The NHS Choices website can help you find a dentist based on your postcode. If you are able to travel, then you may wish to broaden your search <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-dentist>

One of the things people told us was that they were using the NHS choices website to find local dentists that accepted NHS patients, but when they rang them, this information was incorrect.

## Method

We carried out telephone research to get an accurate picture regarding waiting times and accessing appointments across dental practices in County Durham.

From September to December 2021, HWCD’s volunteers telephoned all the dental practices in County Durham offering NHS treatment (based on information we received from NHS England). They were asked seven questions about the current situation accessing appointments at their practice. In total we rang 54 practices and were able to speak to a staff member in 42 of them (78%)



## Demographics

All NHS Dental practices across County Durham were initially included in this survey, however we were only able to have a conversation with 42 of the 54 practices contacted. There has been no

demographic analysis undertaken in relation to this report. It did not include Darlington Dental practices.

## Findings

These are the 7 questions asked to all 42 Dental practices in the County Durham area. They are analysed below.

Survey questions:

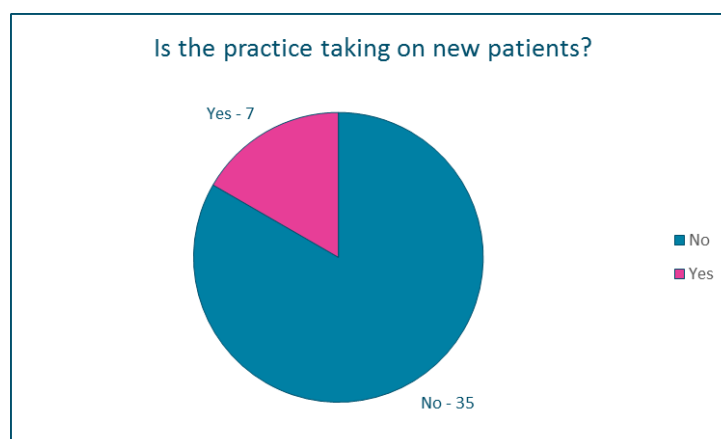
- Is the practice taking on new NHS patients?
- If yes, how long do patients have to wait for an appointment? If no, when are you likely to be taking on new NHS patients?
- Is the practice aware that patients do not need to be registered with a practice to access dental treatment?
- How many emergency appointments are released each day and at what time?
- Does the practice experience many “Did not attend” (DNA’s)? Could you give us an indication of how many?
- Is the practice accessible for wheelchair users and those with mobility issues?
- Any other comments/information that the practice feels would be useful for us to know?

## Responses to our survey

1. Is the practice taking on new NHS patients?

- 35 out of 42 (83%) practices told us they were not registering new NHS patients
- 7 (17%) answered yes, with clarification from 3 that this was only for children.
- 12 were unavailable to answer.

This highlights there is a shortage of NHS dental places in County Durham. Overall, there is very limited access for new registrations, meaning routine appointments such as dental check-ups are not available for unregistered patients.



2. If yes, how long do patients have to wait for an appointment?  
If no, when are you likely to be taking on new NHS patients?

Overall, the findings showed a majority of dental practices have no clear date of when they will be in a position to register new patients. In addition to this, there is often a waiting list or backlog of existing patients to process before any new registrations can be considered. Many stated that they regularly review their numbers, but it may be a few months or they have no date at this time. There are waiting lists in place and some are very long.

From the seven that replied yes, the wait for an appointment varied from 1 month to 3 months plus. Overall, the view is that it will take time and only emergency appointments are available quickly for short-term treatment.

Question 1 and 2 show there is a difficult and uncertain situation for unregistered patients in County Durham. There are very limited places to register as an NHS patient and an unknown date of when this will change.

3. Is the practice aware that patients do not need to be registered with a practice to access dental treatment?

All 42 dental practices that answered replied yes to this question; they are aware non-registered patients should be able to access treatment

- Many clarified they do provide appointments for emergencies
- Others added they are busy processing their registered patients first
- Some clarified they have limited capacity due to having only 1 dentist working
- Only one response said they could not see unregistered emergency patients due to being at capacity and only offer phone triage help for any pain

4. How many emergency appointments are released each day and at what time?

This question received a varied response. Importantly, it showed emergency appointments can be booked by anyone who requires it. This was especially important considering the responses from question 1 and 2. It means that patients in County Durham should be able to access emergency dental treatment without being a registered NHS patient. It depended on individual practice's procedures, responses varied from two emergency clinics per day in the morning and afternoon to daily appointments when the dentist had time. The main findings can be broken down as follows

- There are emergency appointments available across County Durham
- They are available for registered and non-registered NHS patients
- They are released daily.
- Some set daily times
- Some appointments are dependent on dentists' daily availability and number of dentists working in a practice
- Cancellations can often be rebooked as emergency appointments
- Individual practices have their own systems

- Access to these appointments is often by telephone calls in the morning, often a first come first served basis
- Phone triage offered
- NHS 111 referrals
- Patients in pain will be treated as quickly as possible

The feedback HWCD has received from patients states that NHS 111 referrals often result in patients being redirected back to their dental practice and that emergency appointments are often already booked when they contact their practice. Telephone triage doesn't always provide the patient with an appointment when it is needed.

5. Does the practice experience many “Did not attend” (DNA’s)? Could you give us an indication of how many?

This question received a very mixed response. It clearly showed there are DNA's in the region of County Durham. However, it is much worse in some practices.

Most places do have DNAs to an extent. Only 6 (14%) said they did not have them.

It is clear from the survey that appointments are being wasted due to DNAs in County Durham. It ranged from rarely to daily in the responses.

Practices tackle this in different ways; six specifically stated they send a reminder text or phone call. One practice stated it takes a deposit to secure appointments, however this is only applicable to patients who pay for their NHS treatment.

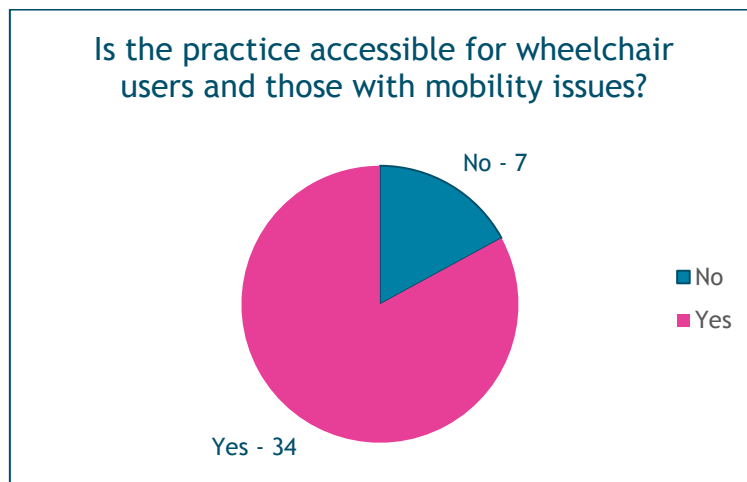
Some observations,

- One stated it is worse in the school holidays.
- DNAs are a mix of both registered and emergency patients.
- Late cancellations also an issue in wasting appointments.
- Two practices said they had less DNAs now as appointments are harder to get.
- No clear pattern to the numbers, it was very dependent on the individual practices.

This could be an area of focus to help move towards a solution for creating more NHS capacity in County Durham.



6. Is the practice accessible for wheelchair users and those with mobility issues?



The survey has shown that the majority, 83%, of Dental Practices in County Durham are accessible.

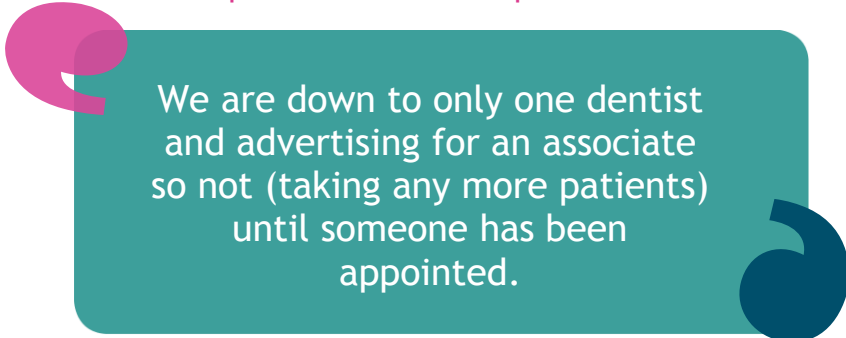
Observations:

- 17% are not accessible.
- It shows there could be an increase in difficulty for wheelchair users or those with impaired mobility issues in accessing dental appointments.
- This could be an area for development, providing up to date information on accessibility to help get treatment in a suitable practice.
- New custom-built practices had easy access whereas older pre-existing buildings posed greater access problems. For example, steps or narrower doorways.
- One practice has fitted a chair lift to allow patients to use this independently or with help of a carer.

7. Any other comments/information that the practice feels would be useful for us to know?

- One practice said they receive calls from NHS patients needing help that have been told by other practices to contact them. They felt larger practices were diverting NHS patients to them despite them being a small practice. It was frustrating for the patients as it was incorrect information. Even possibly from out of the local area.
- Another stated they do everything they can to help people, especially those in pain.
- One stated they felt that dentists are being neglected.
- Practices are happy to help where they can.
- One stated it offers varied appointment times to accommodate those who work.

- One stated it is struggling to get enough dentists to work, and that this was made worse by the Covid 19 pandemic.
- One stated it had private dental care plans available.

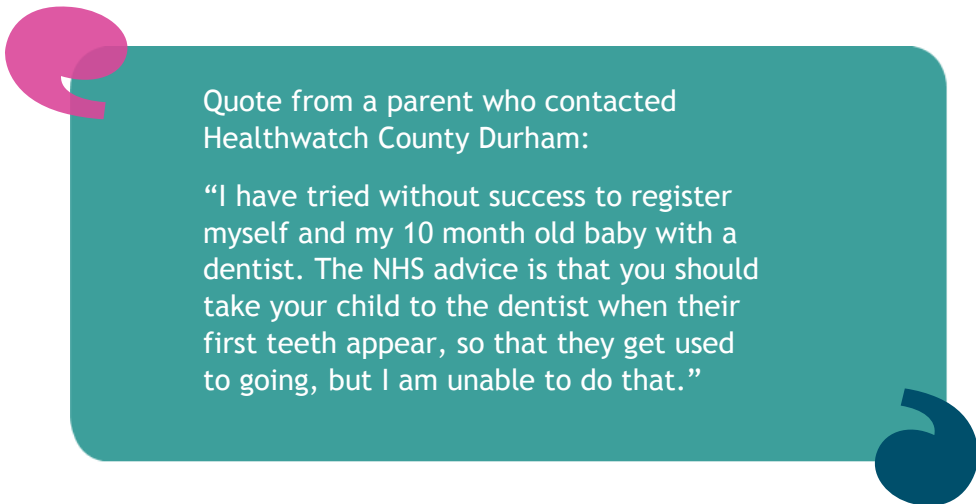
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We are down to only one dentist and advertising for an associate so not (taking any more patients) until someone has been appointed.

In addition to the survey, we also cross-referenced answers with the information on the NHS find a dentist website for the practices included in the survey. In relation to registering patients the findings were as follows,

- In 35% of the practices the survey response and information on the NHS website matched.
- In 12% of the practices the survey response and information on the NHS website did not match.
- 5% of practices included could not be located on the NHS website.
- 43% of practices had no recent updates on the NHS website.
- 5% showed information based on their survey answer about registering patients, stating children only, but this was not reflected on the NHS choices website.

This demonstrates a confusing and difficult situation for both NHS patients and practices, given the changing situation, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic. Patients should be able to access up to date information.

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Quote from a parent who contacted Healthwatch County Durham:

“I have tried without success to register myself and my 10 month old baby with a dentist. The NHS advice is that you should take your child to the dentist when their first teeth appear, so that they get used to going, but I am unable to do that.”

Our findings are in line with other work carried out nationally by Healthwatch which shows an overall reduction in the number of patients seen who can be seen. It highlights the reduction in the number of children seen by dentists.

### Nationally Healthwatch have found the following,

- Public feedback on NHS dental care has risen five-fold over the last 18 months, compared to pre-pandemic levels. It now accounts for nearly 25% of all the feedback Healthwatch England receive.
- Analysis of 8,019 people's experiences of NHS dentistry between April 2020 and September 2021 shows that four in five people report struggling to access NHS dental care, including emergency treatment.
- Positive sentiment, which was around 30% before the COVID-19 pandemic, is down to its lowest ever level - at just 2%.
- Some dental practices have either shut down or have gone fully private. Some dentists have used up their total NHS capacity and are asking people for private fees instead.
- Many people find it hard to get up-to-date information about which practices are taking on new patients because NHS and dentists' websites aren't updated regularly. As a result, more people are contacting their local Healthwatch hoping that they'd provide them with accurate information.
- It is often the most vulnerable people in our society, including children, disabled people and those living in care homes, who are suffering the most.  
**(HWE NHS Dental Care Comms pack 2021)**

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In 2020-21, the NHS delivered 69% fewer courses of treatment compared with the previous year [NHS Dental Statistics for England Annual Report](#)

The Covid 19 pandemic has continued to complicate this issue and Sara Hurley, The Chief Dental Officer for England, issued an updated response in mid-December including the concerns the new variant may have on dental practices. The government will continue to monitor the situation and advise as necessary.

In addition, there is a dentistry survey currently in circulation to gain more insight into the current situation and feelings from the dental practices themselves. This could be a useful follow up when completed.

## Conclusions

- In summary, there is a problematic shortage of NHS dental places for new registrations and routine appointments are not available. This will lead to issues for children, people moving into the area, unregistered patients and those who do not pay for NHS treatment. Many patients can only be seen once there is a problem requiring emergency treatment, rather than early intervention.
- There are long waiting times for new registrations and non-emergency treatments such as routine check-ups.
- There is no clear timeline for such problems being resolved.
- Emergency appointments are available daily across the county, but not enough to meet demand.
- Dental Practices are aware patients do not need to be registered to access treatment.
- “Do not addends” (DNAs) are a problem in the county and appointments are being wasted.
- There is increased difficulty for wheelchair users and those with mobility issues as not all dental practices are accessible.
- Most dental practices can help those that need it, but currently only for emergency treatment.
- The findings from the survey are synonymous with the issues raised by patients contacting HWCD.

## Recommendations and next steps

- NHS England to actively encourage all practices to implement appointment reminder services to reduce the level of DNA's.
- All dental practices to be mandated to keep online information up to date for patients. NHS England do send a regular reminder email and there is a quick link to the practice data allowing this to be easily updated.
- NHS England to consider additional funding for school programmes to ensure children have early access to dental education and care.
- NHS England to provide regular updates to Healthwatch as restrictions change and access to services are adjusted accordingly.
- HWCD will continue to provide data to Healthwatch England to enable them to report on the national picture.
- HWCD to review data trends and information provided by patients and feedback to NHS England and Healthwatch England as appropriate.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to the Healthwatch volunteers who helped us with this research and the dental practices in the county who made time to give us insight into the current situation with appointments.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1

#### Survey questions:

1. Is the practice taking on new NHS patients
2. If yes, how long do patients have to wait for an appointment? If no, when are you likely to be taking on new NHS patients?
3. Is the practice aware that patients do not need to be registered with a practice to access dental treatment?
4. How many emergency appointments are released each day and at what time?
5. Does the practice experience many “Did not attend” (DNA’s)? Could you give us an indication of how many?
6. Is the practice accessible for wheelchair users and those with mobility issues?
7. Any other comments/information that the practice feels would be useful for us to know

## References

- Healthwatch England update on dental services [Healthwatch England-Dentistry-Update-Dec-2021.pdf](#)
- NHS website [Find a dentist - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)
- NHS national dental data - [NHS Dental Statistics for England - 2020-21 Annual Report - NHS Digital](#)