

Focus on Dentists

By Healthwatch Medway



February 2022

Summary

We hear more feedback about NHS dentists than anything else.

Since June last year, 32 people contacted us because they have been unable to find an NHS dentist who will accept new patients.

We wanted to find out more and understand the issues people in Medway are having when they want to see a dentist.

We spoke to 94 people in total. Over half of them were either not registered with an NHS dentist, or had problems getting an appointment with their NHS dentist. This is not unique to Medway, and reflects the national picture.

People told us they are having problems registering children with NHS dentists, but practices told us that they prioritise registration of children.

Our findings suggest that Covid has exacerbated the health inequalities that already existed for people who are trying to access a dentist in Medway.

Context

Current guidance recommends that all children should visit the dentist at least twice a year, for prevention of tooth decay.

However, in 2018 tooth decay was the top reason for children being admitted to hospital in Medway. In 2019, we highlighted a year-on-year increase of the number of tooth extractions being carried out in hospitals, due to tooth decay in young children

We know that access to dental care has been severely limited during the pandemic. Data from the Medway Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) suggests that there were pre-existing inequalities in the uptake of primary care dental services in Medway, which could have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic.

Given the number of calls to our Information and Signposting service, we wanted to establish if access to dentists was a problem across all age groups, or if some people were finding it harder than others to get dental and oral care.

Headline findings

Our findings suggest that pre-existing inequalities in access to primary dental care in Medway have worsened during Covid:



Parents / guardians are finding it difficult to register children with an NHS Dentist

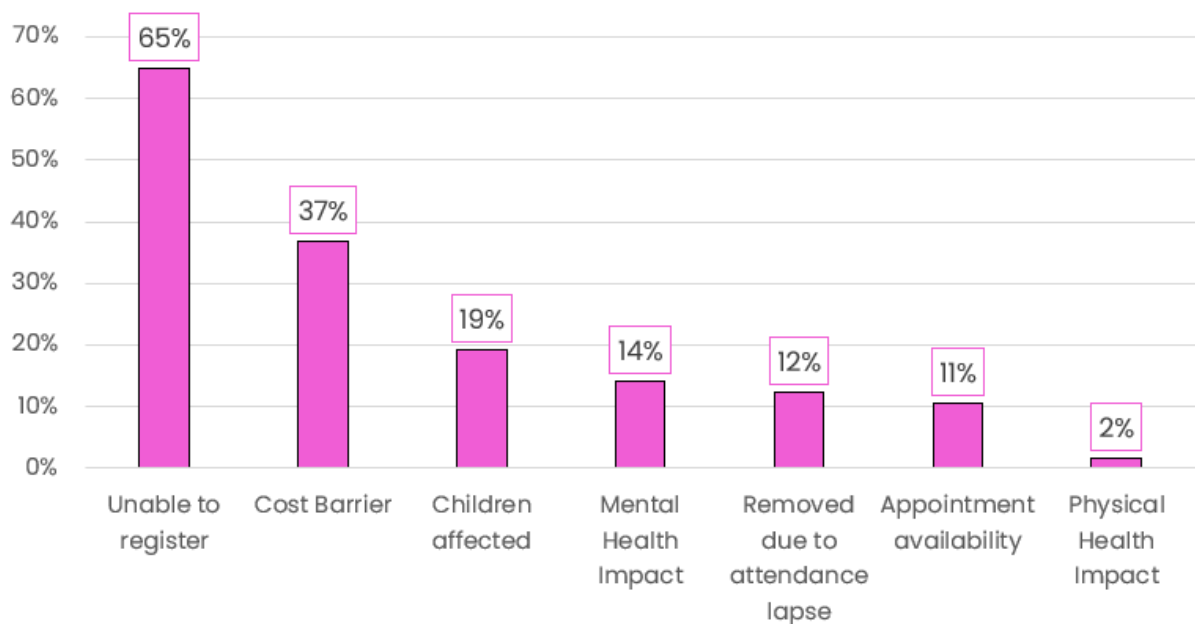


The cost of NHS and private dentistry is a barrier to accessing dental care



Some people are waiting a considerable time for an NHS appointment, while those able to afford private care can get an appointment within a week.

Top Themes From All Engagement (those experiencing an issue)



What are we recommending?

- The Medway JSNA needs to recognise the potential for an increased number of children who will require hospital admission for dental related problems because they are unable to get regular dental check ups. This data is needed to inform future planning.
- The JSNA also needs to highlight the growing inequality in access to dental care within Medway.
- Medway Public Health to co-create oral and dental health messaging with communities across local authority and NHS funded community services. This will raise awareness and better understanding of the importance of regular dental check-ups, and encourage people to remain on an active dental register and promote the importance of good oral health.
- The Kent Local Dental Committee (which covers Medway) to encourage its members to ensure information about registration and access to appointments is up to date on Dental Practice websites.
- The Kent Local Dental Committee to continue to work with Healthwatch Medway to push for NHS dental reforms to create more equitable and affordable dental care in Medway

Who did we speak to?

We spoke to 94 people in total

32

people contacted our information and signposting service

28

people spoke to us during our street surveys

28

people completed our online survey

6

people took part in a focus group at an Age UK centre

What did they tell us?

People contacting our Information and signposting service

In the past eight months, 32 people contacted us about dentistry.

The most frequent issue was difficulty in accessing a dentist, because surgeries were not accepting new NHS patients. Four people had lost their registration due to a lapse in attending.

“I’ve called about 10 different dentists about registering as an NHS patient and the closest I got to registering is an 18-month waiting list.”

“I have just moved to Chatham and would like to register with an NHS dentist, but I have rung 15 dentists so far and none of them are taking on NHS patients.”

Some of the people who contacted us were in pain and needed emergency treatment.

“Trying to find nearest NHS dentist for someone unregistered, in excruciating pain and need to get extractions done.”

Others told us how the cost of private treatment was preventing them from seeing a dentist.

“I had a private consultation with a private dentist, however they have charged me a ludicrous and unaffordable price, so I need help finding an NHS dentist to get the work done.”

“I’ve got money, have been saving up, but can’t get an NHS appointment. It’s not fair. I can’t afford private healthcare, I’m on disability benefit and that’s not covered for dentist”



People participating in street surveys

Of the 28 people who stopped and spoke to us during our street survey, 10 of them (36%) told us they were not registered with a dentist.

Of the 64% (18) who did have dentists, 14 were NHS patients, and 4 were private patients, 3 of whom felt they had no option other than to pay privately, as they were unable to find an NHS dentist.

50% (14) of people said that the costs of dental services had stopped them getting treatment

“I tried for over a year to get into a dental practice including emailing the NHS and couldn’t get in anyway. In the end I had to go private which caused me to take out a loan to pay them back”

“I have been refused dental work because I can’t pay private fees. I have been quoted £3,000 for the work that needs to be done.”

57% (16) of people said that being unable to find a dentist had an impact on their physical or mental wellbeing. With 44% (7) saying they were unable to eat certain foods, 31% (5) saying it made them self-conscious and 25% saying that impacted on their sleep and stress levels.



People participating in online surveys

64% (18) of people had found it difficult to get an appointment with an NHS dentist. Five of these people told us that they were registered but still unable to book appointments and had been waiting a long time. Four people said they were unable to find an NHS dentist that they could register with.

18% (5) people told us that they were struggling to get NHS appointments for their children.

“My daughter has just turned one, and we've been trying to get her registered with a dentist, and they either don't answer the phone or won't accept NHS. Our health visitor told us to go on a certain site to check who has availability, but no one updates it.”

7% (2) people told us that they had to go to a private dentist as they were unable to find an NHS one.

“Tried for weeks, in the end the pain was so bad had to over two hundred pounds privately. Managed to fit us in then within a couple of hours.”

7% (2) people told us that cost impacted their ability to see a dentist.

22% (6) of those that participated online gave positive feedback about their dentist.

“My dentist is brilliant. Been able to get appointments all through lockdown. The only thing they wasn't doing was routine check-ups. The dentist would call and triage over phone first then offer an appointment”



Focus Group at Age UK

Five of the 6 people we spoke to, didn't have an NHS dentist that they visited regularly.

One person told us that they have a dentist, but that they haven't had an appointment in over two years. The other four people told us that they never went to the dentist and that they would only go if there was a problem with their teeth. They told us that they believed that growing up on a war time diet meant that they have less problems with their teeth. This group felt that the cost of dentistry, including NHS treatment was too expensive and that this affected their decision not to go to the dentist.

Dental Practice's perspective

To understand the issues from the perspective of Dental Practices, we reached out to 33 practices by email and a follow up phone call, but only 5 responded.

Four of the practices were accepting private patients. Only 2 practises were accepting NHS patients, but only if they were children.

Two of the Dental Practices told us that their website did not have up to date registration or appointment information on it.



A bit about us!

Healthwatch Medway is the independent voice for local people in Medway. We gather and represent people's views about any health and social care service in Medway.

Our role is to understand what matters most to people and to use that information to influence providers and commissioners to change the way services are designed and developed.

Our FREE Information and Signposting service can help you navigate Medway's complicated health and social care system to ensure you can find and access the services that are available for you.

We'd love to hear from you. Get in touch.



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By Text:
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texting 'NEED BSL', Healthwatch's
British Sign Language interpreter
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