



**Experiences with dentistry in  
Northumberland since March 2020**

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has affected many areas of the NHS both locally and nationally. One significant issue that people have raised nationally is about access to dental care.

[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. This is having an adverse effect on members of the public being able to see a local dentist for both regular check-ups and when emergency treatment is needed. Not only has this been frustrating, but many people have been left in pain or discomfort as a result. Some individuals have been offered the option of having private treatment, but this is not affordable for many.

Without improved access to NHS dental care, not only do people risk facing greater dental problems in the future, pressure will increase on overstretched hospitals and GPs. Untreated dental problems can lead to pain, infection and the exacerbation of other health conditions such as heart and lung disease and stroke. This national picture is echoed in Northumberland, and throughout the second half of 2021 we received feedback from the public that accessing NHS dental services was very difficult, whether registering with an NHS dentist or getting treatment.

With the need to now have lull time in the consulting room between patients, due to COVID-safe guidelines, there is no longer the capacity within NHS dental services to meet their targets, let alone deal with the backlog of appointments that didn't go ahead due to the lockdown.

Following an initial meeting between Healthwatch Northumberland, Healthwatch North Tyneside, Healthwatch Newcastle, Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch South Tees, the opportunity to work collaboratively with local Healthwatch partners across the North East was offered to all local Healthwatch. Collectively we agreed that there is a need for better access, to NHS dental services, but that this needed surveying and reporting both locally and on a regional basis.

Three other local Healthwatch joined the group: Healthwatch Hartlepool, Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees and Healthwatch Darlington. These eight 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:

<b>Gateshead</b>	<b>Stockton</b>
<b>Darlington</b>	<b>South Tees</b>
<b>Hartlepool</b>	<b>Newcastle</b>
<b>Northumberland</b>	<b>North Tyneside</b>

## Aim of the study

The aim was to determine whether accessing NHS dental services is being raised by a small number of people having a problem or whether it is a more widespread issue. If it is a widespread issue, then to use our findings 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

The project had three parts to it:

1. Survey for members of the public
2. Survey for local dental practices
3. Public information campaign

### 1. Survey for members of the public

An online and paper survey which focused on trying to get treatment, experiences of treatment and asked about NHS and private treatment was launched on 29 November 2021. It was distributed through local Healthwatch networks online, at planned engagement events, and with partners. 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 appointments, and
- treatment at a dental hospital.

We asked about experiences happening throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period starting in March 2020, to early January 2022. The questions were drafted by Healthwatch North Tyneside, agreed with the collective eight local Healthwatch teams, and tested with volunteers.

A total of 41 people took part in our survey and a total of 795 people responded to the survey across the region. Additional to this survey, we received approximately a dozen comments in Quarter 2 of 2021-22 complaining either about not being able to find a dentist to get treatment (about two-thirds of the comments) or discovering that they had been 'de-registered' when the patients had tried to book an appointment with their usual dental practice.

## 2. Survey for local dental practices

During the same period, November 2021 to January 2022, our volunteers contacted local dental practices with a series of questions, to understand the availability of services. The questions were drafted by Healthwatch Northumberland, agreed with the collective eight local Healthwatch teams, and tested with our volunteers. Ten dental practices responded to our volunteers.

## 3. Public information campaign

All local Healthwatch involved in the project worked with Local Dentist Committees 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 North East Healthwatch teams 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 emergency care.

[Download the leaflet.](#)



# Findings

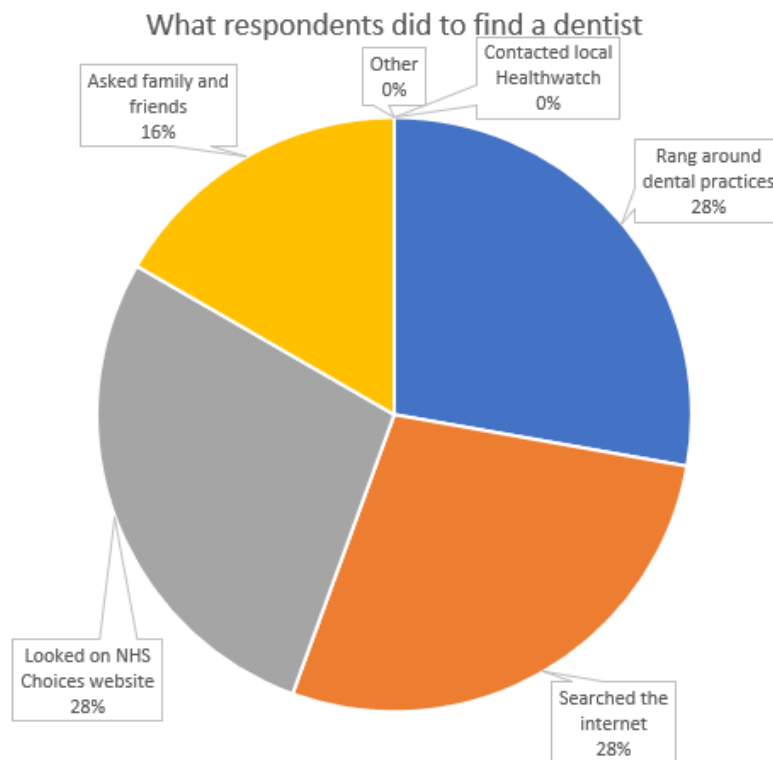
## Finding a dentist

There were six survey responses for this section of the survey with half of the responses describing their experiences as taking place before April 2021 and half since then.

We asked respondents to rate how easy it was to find a dentist.

Very Difficult	1*	2*	3*	4*	5*Very Easy
	5	0	0	1	0

The average star rating on how easy it was to find a dentist was 1.5 out of five. We then asked respondents what they did to find a dentist (they could give more than one answer).



- Five out of six respondents rang round dental practices, searched the internet and looked on NHS choices website.
- Three out of six respondents asked family and friends
- One respondent skipped this question.

We also asked what kind of dental service they were looking for, whether NHS or private.

- Three out of six respondents were looking for NHS
- Two out of six respondents were looking for either
- One respondent skipped this question

We then asked whether looking for help with a particular dental issue.

Five out of six respondents said 'yes'. One respondent skipped this question. Reasons varied but were generally for minor dental issues but two respondents cited pregnancy related issues.

And whether they found a service to meet their needs.

Two out of six respondents said 'yes'. Three out of six respondents said 'no'. One respondent skipped this question.

There were two follow up comments:

*"No one is taking NHS patients at all in the North East"*

*"Due to the lack of availability of NHS places in Cramlington I had to go to a private dental practice, that I have found less expensive than the NHS; because of the amount of past dental work I have had done and ongoing repairs."*

In terms of how far they travelled to receive this service, most respondents had to travel quite a distance.

*"Thirty minutes drive away in neighbouring town."*

*"I was unable to find any NHS treatment and had to pay over £50 for private service. All the dentists I called said they couldn't offer NHS but could offer same week private appointments which was beyond belief."*

*"No available dentist, was advised I would have to drive for about one hour to get to a dentist."*

*"One and a half miles, usually I walk."*

*"Not found."*

We also wanted to know whether they used any services other than their dentist to help get advice about accessing dental care.

One out of six respondents used NHS 111. Two out of six respondents used their GP. Three out of six respondents didn't use any other service.

Lastly for this section we asked whether there was anything that would have improved the experience of trying to find a dentist.

We received three comments:

*"Yes, the NHS should limit dentist access to postcodes like GP services. It is farcical that people like my aged parents come all the way to my town and use NHS services which means I am unable to access a dentist where I live and actually ended up having to go to their town. You should also start charging pensioners more for services which they seem to constantly use."*

*"Dentists offering NHS appointments: They should either be NHS or private and the NHS services should literally just offer NHS appointments as it is not fair. Only people with money can afford non-NHS dentist treatment it's ridiculous and means dental health divides between rich and poor."*

*"Anything that would create more dentist appointments locally."*

## Routine check ups

In this section of the survey we had 19 survey responses, and these experiences were spread throughout 2020–2021 with several clustered in autumn 2021.

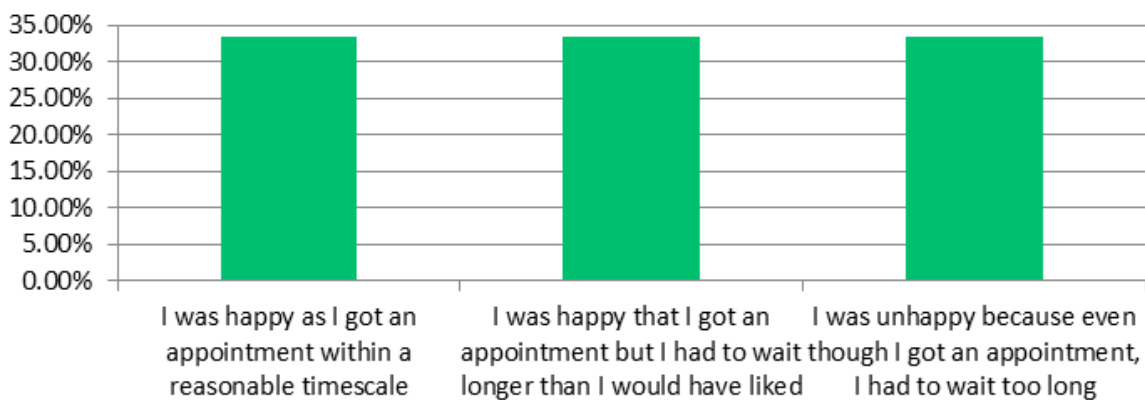
90% of respondents were ringing the dentist about themselves; 5% were ringing about their child and the remaining 5% were calling about another family member. We asked how easy it was to book a routine check-up appointment and the weighted average star rating was 2.7 out of five. There was a spread of opinions across all star ratings, from 1 star rating, equivalent to Very Difficult, to 5 stars, equivalent to Very Easy.

Very Difficult	1*	2*	3*	4*	5* Very Easy
	8	2	1	1	6

The vast majority weren't looking for help with a particular dental issue (18 out of 19 respondents; 95%). The one that was looking for help with a specific issue was due to bleeding gums.

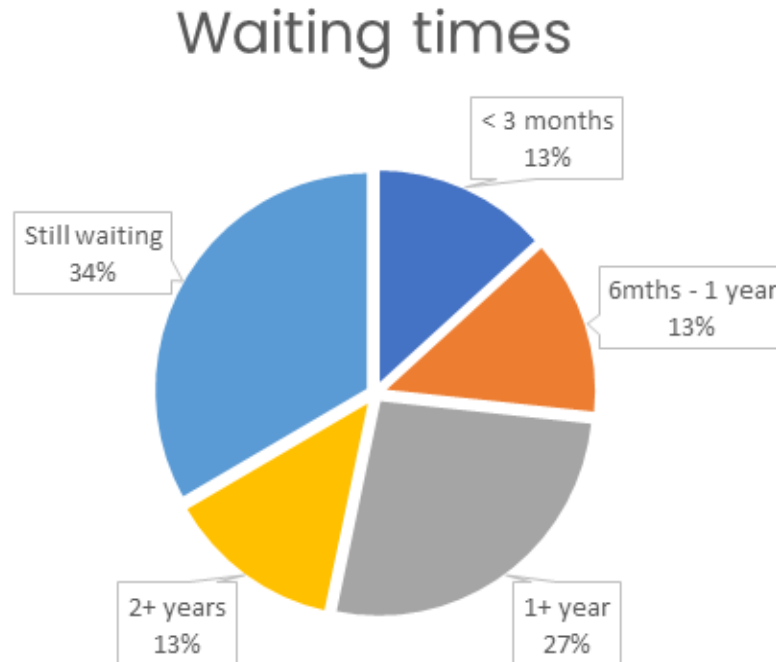
15 out of 19 gave responses to statements around how happy they were with timescales. It was an equal three-way split of five votes per response.

Which of these statements best describes how happy you were with the timescale of appointments?





The 15 respondents had to wait as shown in the chart below.



When we asked respondents to rate the overall experience, the average star rating was three stars:

Terrible	1*	2*	3*	4*	5* Excellent
	6	2	3	1	6

We then asked if any further care or treatment were needed. 75% (12) of respondents didn't need further care or a referral, 19% (three) needed a follow up appointment with their dentist and 6% (one) were referred onto another service – a dental hygienist.

The majority of the appointments were NHS appointments. 89% (16) were NHS appointments, 11% (two) were private and all of the respondents said they used the same dentist that was used prior to the start of the pandemic (18 responses).

100% of responses were 'No' when asked whether respondents needed to seek private appointments due to not being able to find NHS appointments, but there were some who were thinking about it.

*"No, I haven't tried but I have thought about it."*

*"No but am rapidly being persuaded that it might be the only option despite being a pensioner."*

The suggestions of improvements had a universal theme: better communication.

## Appointment for a minor treatment

There were six survey responses for this section and all the responses were for the respondents themselves.

Like in the previous sections we asked people to score how easy it was to book an appointment for a minor issue. This time the average rating of 3 stars.

Very Difficult	1*	2*	3*	4*	5* Very Easy
	2	0	1	0	2

We asked what the minor issue was, to comment on its severity and whether they were in pain. Half of respondents were in pain and the minor issues were:

*"Pain on chewing and biting."*

*"Heavy fall, thought I might have cracked front teeth."*

*"I wasn't in pain but lost several fillings during lockdown - my teeth seemed to crumble."*

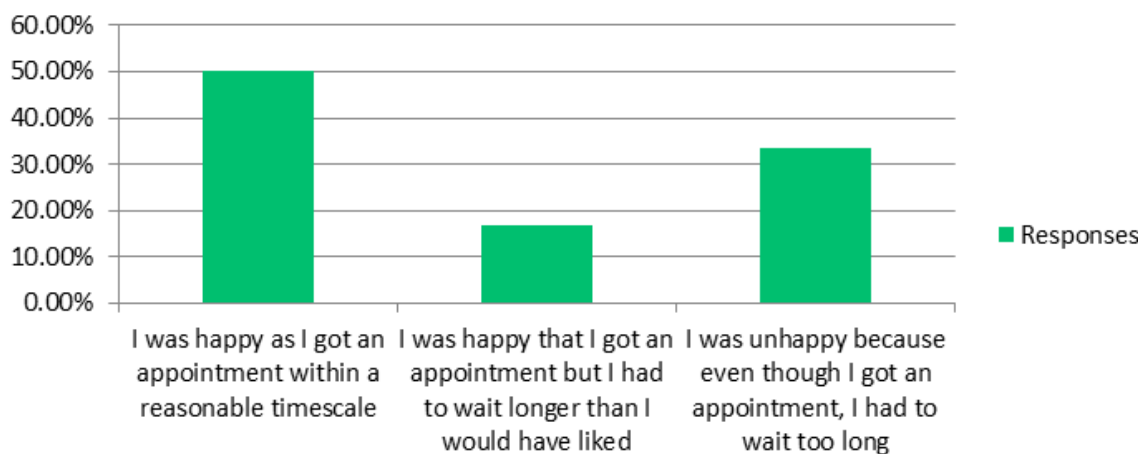
*"Pain and sensitivity around a tooth."*

*"I broke a tooth."*

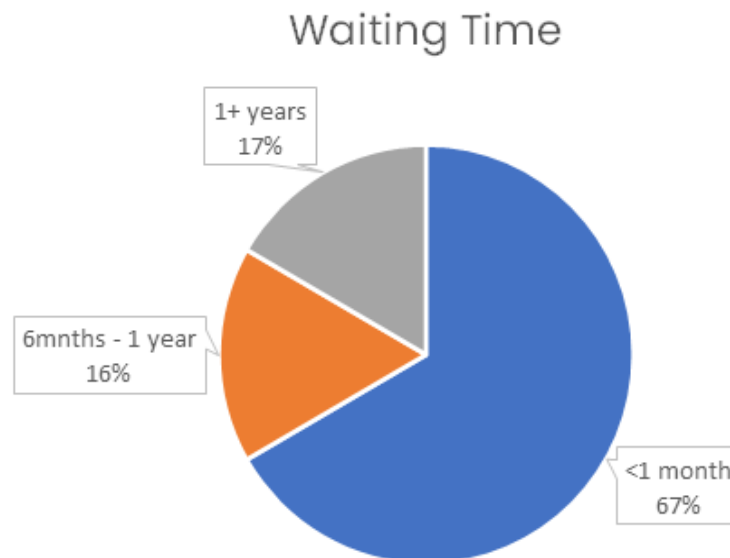
*"Jaw pain and clicking."*

Half of the respondents were happy that they got an appointment in a reasonable timescale and half weren't.

Which of these statements best describes how happy you were with the timescale of appointments?



Waiting times varied from three days to 18 months but most were two–four weeks in length.



The average star rating on overall experience of 3.33 stars was slightly better than the average star rating for the routine check-up section.

Terrible	1*	2*	3*	4*	5* Excellent
	1	2	0	0	3

Half of respondents needed further treatment from their dentists and half needed no further treatment or referrals. All these experiences took place between March 2020 and October 2021. There were no patterns or clustering.

All were NHS appointments and all were with the same dentist that was used prior to the start of the pandemic. No respondents needed to seek private appointments due to not being able to find NHS appointments.

Suggestions for improvements were for the appointments to be scheduled for sooner after the appointment was being made.

*"A quicker appointment, easier to get. It felt like the practice did not care about my issue or my dental health."*

### Urgent Appointments

We received six responses for this section of the survey and all the responses were for the respondents themselves.

The average rating on how easy it was to book an appointment for an urgent appointment was 2.8 stars.

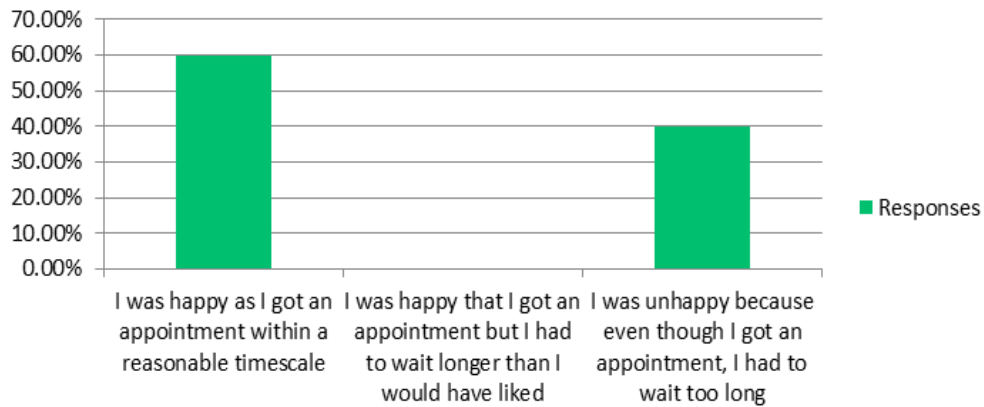
Very Difficult	1*	2*	3*	4*	5* Very Easy
	3	0	0	1	2

We asked what the urgent treatment was for and levels of pain and got the following replies:

- 2 x cracked tooth
- 2 x toothache
- 1 x extreme pain for broken filling/ swollen gums
- 1 x pre-cardiac surgery precautionary check-up

When we asked how happy people were with timescales, we got five responses in total with the majority happy with the timescale in receiving an appointment.

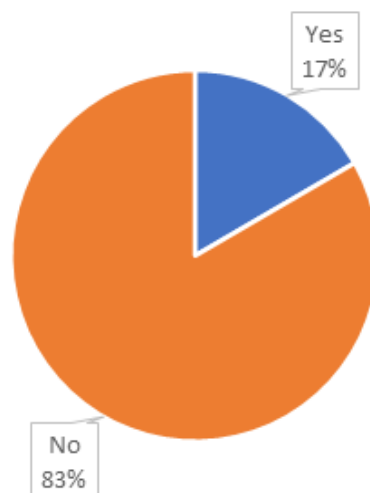
Which of these statements best describes how happy you were with the timescale of appointments?



Waiting times varied from “two hours”, “hardly any time” and “next day” for those who were happy to “four days and I had to ring every morning to get an urgent appointment” and “six weeks” for those who were unhappy.

We also asked, ‘Were you offered self-help advice for your urgent issue whilst waiting?’

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



Rather surprisingly only one respondent was offered advice and they were told to go to a pharmacy for cloves and use a hot water bottle compression.

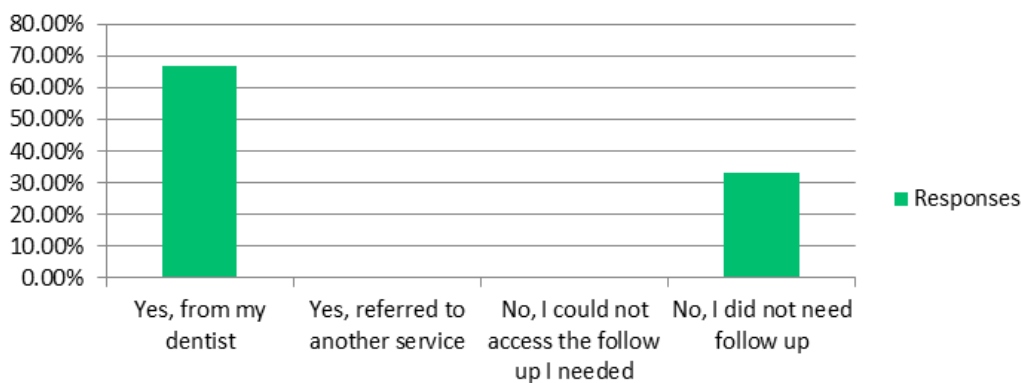
Of far more concern was that only one out of six respondents was given clear information about who to contact and what to do if the situation got worse.

Despite the lack of advice, the average star rating on overall experience was 3.33 stars.

Terrible 1*	2*	3*	4*	5* Excellent
2	0	1	0	3

Two respondents said 'No' and four respondents said 'Yes' in reply to the question, 'Did you access any follow up treatment after your emergency dental appointment?'

### Did you access any follow up treatment after your emergency dental appointment?



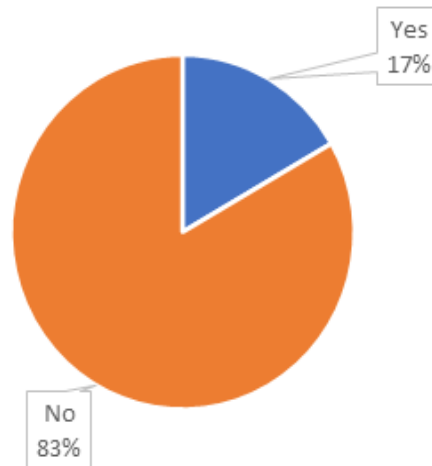
Four respondents said their experience was in the second half of 2021, the other two were in 2020 and all six responses were NHS appointments.

All six responses were about the same dentist that was used prior to the start of the pandemic and none of the respondents needed to seek private appointments due to not being able to find NHS appointments, although one commented, "I did enquire but locally the waiting time was similar to NHS."

We also asked, "Have you called NHS 111 for emergency dental care since March 2020?"

Only one said 'Yes' and told us "They directed me to a surgery that was closed at the weekend – hopeless."

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



Suggestions of improvements for this section of the survey were mainly around being able to access a dentist or get an earlier appointment.

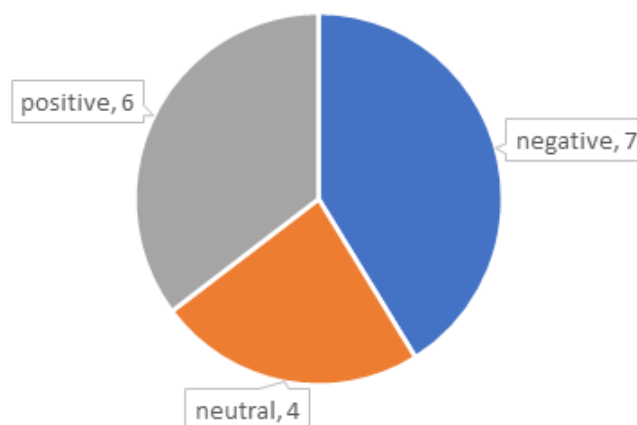
### **Treatment at a dental hospital**

We only had one survey response for this section of the survey, which is such a small sample size that it cannot be statistically valid.

### **Any other comments**

Finally, we asked whether there anything else you want to tell us about dental services?

Number of sentiments expressed



Comments were reasonably spread with a slight lean towards negative sentiments.

### **Negative comment**

*"The difficulties and delays in getting appointments since the start of the pandemic make it feel like the nation's dental health has been ignored and neglected. This is very distressing both physically and mentally for those of us who like to maintain good dental health."*

### **Neutral comment**

*"My understanding from others is that if you had a dental emergency or infection you were able to have an appointment without a wait."*

### **Positive comment**

*"Considering the constraints they were under, the dental practice performed really well: the enquiry desk in particular went out of their way to make sure those who needed to see a dentist could speak to somebody and, if necessary, get treatment."*

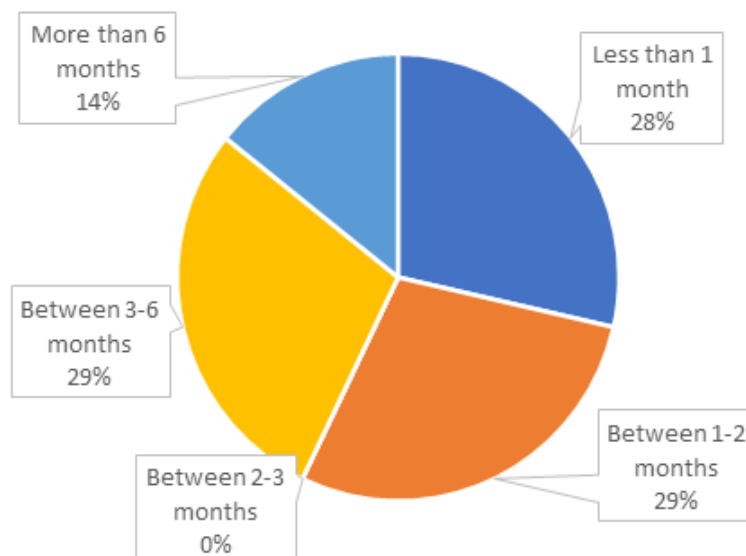


## Survey of dental practices

Our volunteers phoned all the dental practices in Northumberland and got responses from 10 of the practices.

Only 40% of the practices we spoke to were accepting new NHS patients. For a routine check-up on the NHS 57% were seen within two months and 43% had to wait more than three months, as shown below.

Distribution of average waiting times  
for new NHS patients to have routine  
dental treatment



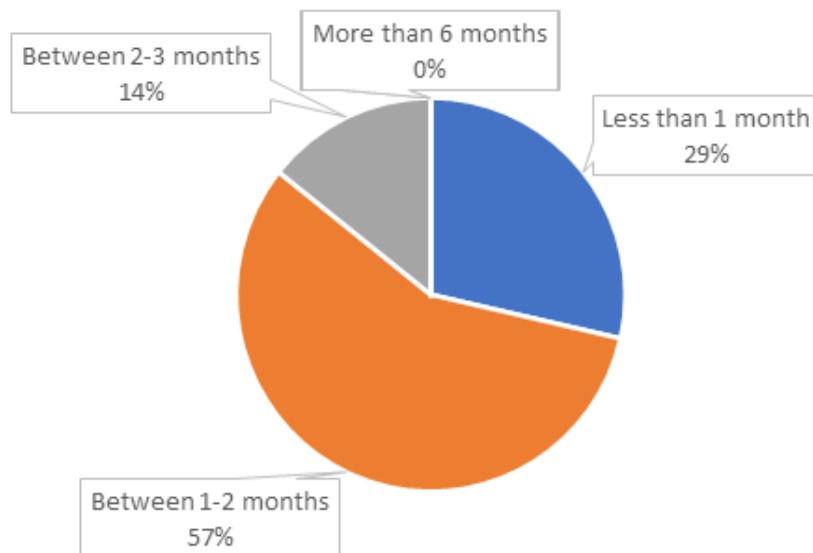
We asked whether they did any form of triage (prioritisation of patients) when a patient called wanting an appointment. All seven of the dentists we had responses from said they asked about the level of pain experienced by the patient and the majority (88%) asked about the symptoms the patient was showing. None of the practices allocated the appointments on a first-come, first-served basis.

We asked whether the practices were seeing private patients as well as NHS ones during the pandemic and all ten of the practices were seeing private patients. Of the eight that answered the question, 'Do you offer a private appointment if there are no remaining NHS appointments?' seven answered 'yes' and one answered 'no'.

We then asked 'What is the approximate waiting time for new private patients to have routine dental treatment i.e. routine check-up and/or scale and polish?' As would be expected, the waiting times are considerably shorter than for NHS patients with 86% of private patients being seen within two months and no patients having to wait longer than three months.



'What is the approximate waiting time for new private patients to have routine dental treatment i.e. routine checkup and/or scale and polish?'



The majority of the dental practices said they did not signpost patients to other practices if they no appointments available but two of the seven practices which answered this question (29%) said they did.

We also asked whether COVID-19 had had an impact on their NHS practice. Five practices responded with the following comments.

*"Limited extent of treatments. Since COVID have had to triage patients. If cannot offer appointment advise patient to contact 111 service."*

*"Cannot take on more NHS Patients. Grateful for receipt of free PPE. Before COVID could offer appointments within two to three days. Now can only offer for emergency treatment. Less time for treatment of patients - more time spent on cleaning etc."*

*"Received free PPE which was appreciated."*

*"New PPE and guidance; fixed period when unable to have patients in. This has changed as time moved on with reduced fallowed periods. Aerosol treatments lead to greater time to clean to safeguard patients and staff. Big gaps between treatments on occasions reducing numbers of patients seen."*

*"Very large effect, PPE, appointment times longer; aerosol affect; more time needed to clean down; fewer patients; staff have to work harder."*

Lastly, we asked for any further comments, and we got the following replies.

*"Initially shut for three months in early stage of pandemic but have caught up with [our] list of private patients now."*

*"Wish we could offer more appointments but restricted since outbreak of COVID."*

*"Doing our best in difficult circumstances and restrictions."*

*"Considering employing an additional dentist. Difficult to give a service to everyone requesting treatment due to constraints imposed. Less time for patients, more time on cleaning, safeguarding etc. For example before COVID the waiting time for an appointment was a few days - now can only offer emergency appointments."*  
(This practice has extended opening hours to cope with demand, hence consideration of employing extra staff.)

*"Difficult. NHS practices finding it difficult to take on new patients due to the backlog currently. Always take on a child if no NHS practice - high risk children and adults. New variants - 85% NHS targets in next three months - unachievable. NHS dental contract needs reviewing as unattainable."*

*"NHS put targets on us for dental activities. Although reduced, [it's] difficult to achieve due to restrictions of COVID - concerns about safety of your staff and patients. In Northumberland [it's] difficult to recruit new dentists due to rural area - shortage of practitioners - therefore difficult to cover the demand."*

## Conclusions

Based on the responses to our survey there seems to be greatest difficulty, and therefore dissatisfaction, with finding an NHS dentist as it seems to be almost impossible to be 'registered' as a new patient. It appears that the dental practices are struggling to cope with their existing patients and have no further capacity to accept new patients, due to the restraints imposed by being COVID-safe and problems recruiting staff.

The situation is better for those patients who are existing patients and the ease of booking an appointment for routine check-ups, minor dental issues and emergency dental appointments - although not perfect in any way - seems to lean towards patients being slightly more satisfied than dissatisfied. Invariably, patients were able to use the dental practice they used before the pandemic, for both minor and emergency treatment.

Although the dental practices who responded to our survey are trying their very best to see and treat as many patients as possible, they are struggling under the constraints imposed by the levels of hygiene required, COVID regulations and with limited resources.

We think the provision of NHS dentistry in Northumberland is not meeting the needs of the county. The way in which NHS dentistry is commissioned is too complicated and not transparent. This is leading to the perception that dentists are trying to push patients into becoming private patients rather than being treated on the NHS.

## Recommendations

We recommend:

- The NHS dental contract be reviewed and simplified.
- There is better publicity of how to access NHS dentistry and how it is funded.
- There is better communication with the public to keep them informed of access and waiting times for treatment.

## Next Steps

We will use our findings to:

- Maintain our support to patients by signposting to services, encouraging them to interact and share their views directly with providers.
- 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).
- Compare with Healthwatch England's latest report: ['What people have told us about dentistry: A review of our evidence April to September 2021'](#).
- Maintain our intelligence about current provision in local dental practices.

## Appendix 1

Demographic breakdown – numbers of responses per category

### 1. Age category

Answer Choices	Responses	
13-17	0%	0
18-24	0%	0
25-34	0%	0
35-44	13%	4
45-54	13%	4
55-64	10%	3
65-74	50%	15
75+	10%	3
Prefer not to say	3%	1
Answered	30	
Skipped	11	

## 2. Gender

Answer Choices	Responses	
Man	27%	8
Woman	73%	22
Intersex	0%	0
Non-binary	0%	0
Other	0%	0
Prefer not to say	0%	0
Answered	30	
Skipped	11	

## 3. Is your gender different from the sex you were assigned at birth?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	3%	1
No	97%	29
Prefer not to say	0%	0

## 4. Ethnic background

Ethnicity	Responses	
Arab	0%	0
Asian / Asian British: Bangladeshi	0%	0
Asian / Asian British: Chinese	0%	0
Asian / Asian British: Indian	0%	0
Asian / Asian British: Pakistani	0%	0
Asian / Asian British: Any other Asian / Asian British background	0%	0
Black / Black British: African	0%	0
Black / Black British: Caribbean	0%	0
Black / Black British: Any other Black / Black British background	0%	0
Gypsy, Roma or Traveller	0%	0
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Asian and White	0%	0
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Black African and White	0%	0
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White	0%	0
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background	4%	1
White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh	93%	25
White: Irish	0%	0
White: Any other White background	4%	1
Another ethnic background	0%	0
Prefer not to say	0%	0
Answered	27	
Skipped	14	

## 5. Carer, have a disability or a long-term health condition?

(Please select all that apply):

- Yes, I consider myself to be a carer = 2
- Yes, I consider myself to have a disability = 5
- Yes, I consider myself to have a long-term condition = 16
- None of the above = 11
- I'd prefer not to say = 1

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