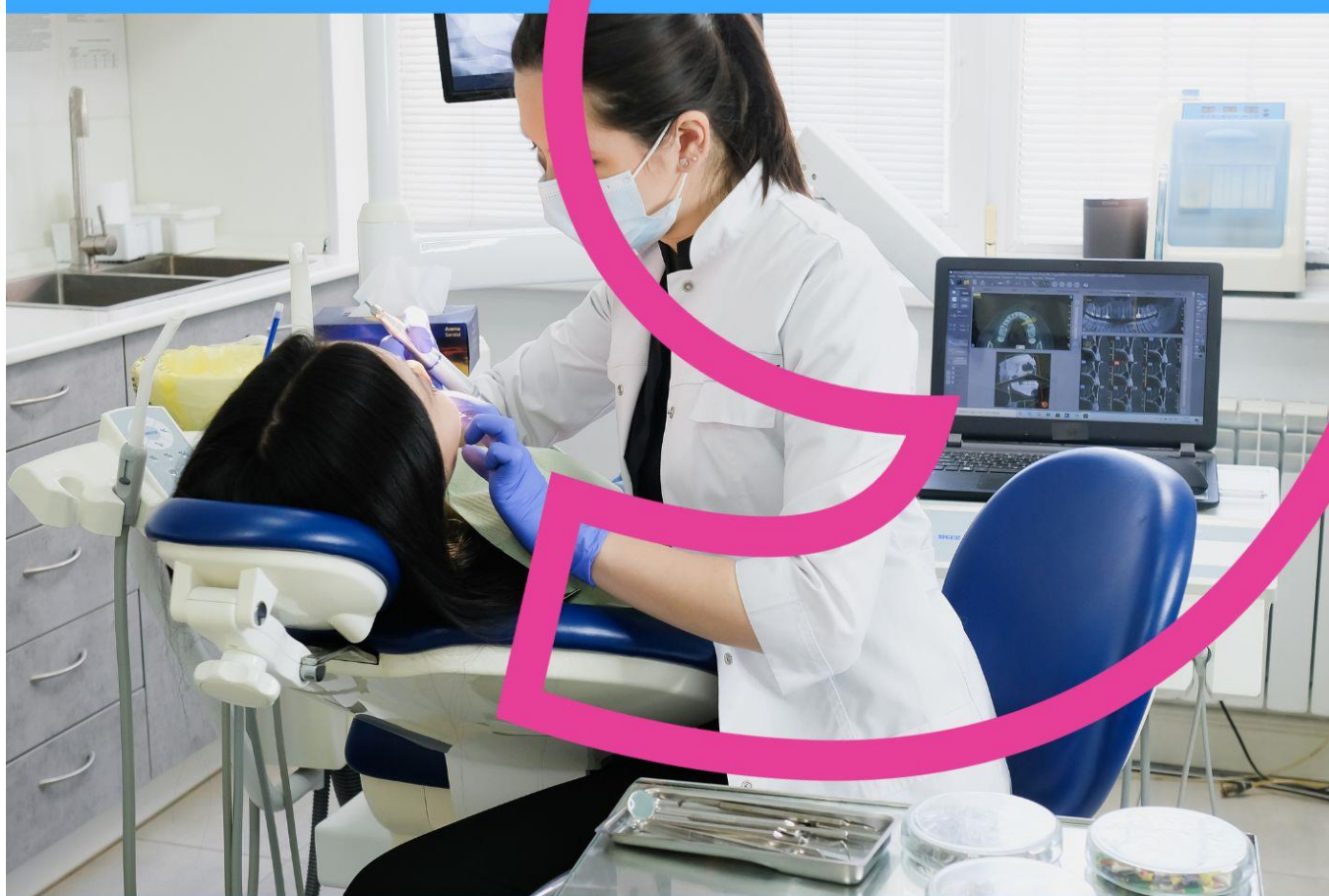


Access to NHS Dental Care in Walsall

October 2023



Engaging
Communities
Solutions

healthwatch
Walsall

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Introduction

Healthwatch Walsall is the independent voice of the public in health and social care issues in Walsall. Healthwatch Walsall collect feedback from the public in Walsall about their experiences of using health and social care services and use that feedback to work with service providers and commissioners to find ways to improve services.

One of the ways that we collect feedback is to carry out projects that reflect the priorities of the public and that focus on particular services, conditions or parts of the community. Recently we have undertaken a close look at one of those key issues; experiences of NHS dentistry.

Nationally access to NHS dental care has been recognised as a growing issue. Challenges with access existed before the pandemic but have deteriorated progressively since then.

Healthwatch England found in 2022/2023 that dentistry was ‘the second most common issue’ reported to Healthwatch with access being the most frequent reason for the feedback. Sentiment became more adverse with 62% of feedback being negative compared to 55% in 2020/2021. ¹ The House of Commons Health Select Committee found that ‘NHS dentistry is facing a crisis of access.’ ²

¹ [New report calls for fundamental reform of NHS dental care | Healthwatch](#)

² [NHS dentistry - Health and Social Care Committee \(parliament.uk\)](#)

What we did?

We carried out a survey to gather feedback from people about their experiences of accessing NHS dental services in Walsall. A survey was used because it enabled us to reach a broad range of people across the Borough. It was available online and we also handed it out at community events and promoted it on social media.

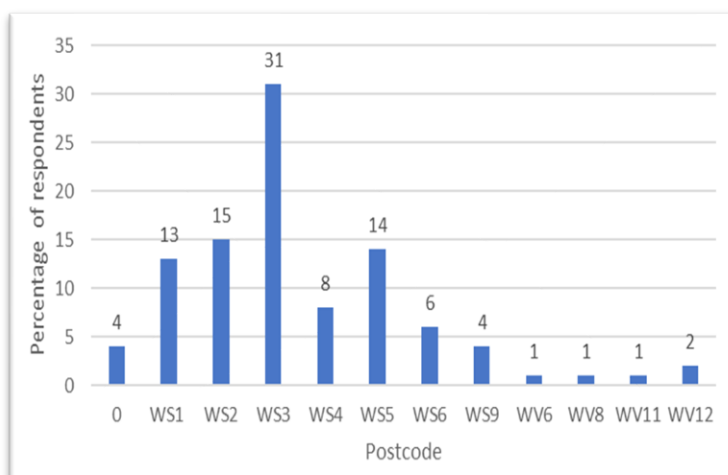
We also contacted all of the dental practices in Walsall to see if they were taking on new NHS patients.

Who took part?

119 people took part in the survey.



Postcode areas



Top 5 respondent areas

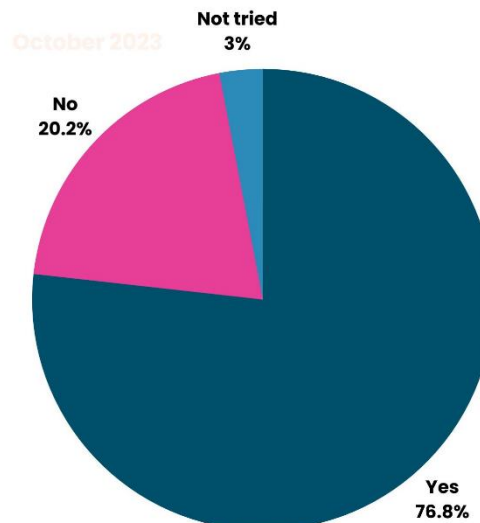
1. **WS3** – Bloxwich, Blakenall, Coalpool & Pelsall
2. **WS2** – Pleck, Birchills, Bentley & Leamore
3. **WS5** – Bescot & Tamebridge
4. **WS1** – Walsall Town Centre, Caldmore & Palfrey
5. **WS4** – Rushall

Findings

The findings from the survey are presented in this section. The percentages represent the number of people who answered each question and not all respondents answered every question. Due to rounding, some of the totals do not add up to **100%**. The number of people who took part is not a representative sample of the population and therefore, the findings present a snapshot of the views and experiences of the people who took part in the survey.

Have you been able to access NHS dental care in the last 12 months?

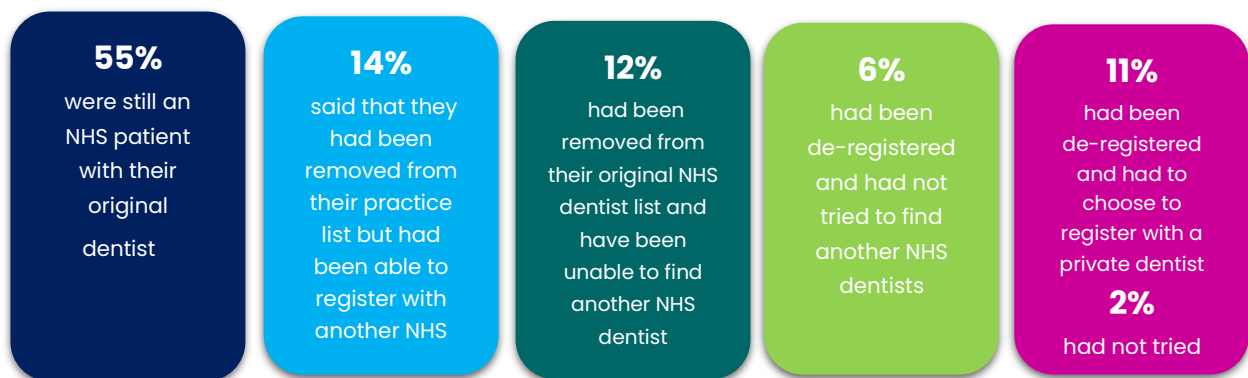
People were asked if they had been able to access dental care in the previous 12 months. **3%** of respondents had not tried to access NHS dental care in the last year. **20%** of respondents said that they had not been able to access NHS dental care in the last year and **76%** said that they had been able to access NHS dental care in the last 12 months.



When those who said that they had not accessed NHS dental care in the last 12 months, they were asked for the reasons why most people commented that there were 'no appointments' or they 'couldn't get an appointment.' Dentists 'not taking NHS patients' was mentioned, as was being 'removed' from the dentists list.

Two people said that they 'haven't had a problem with their teeth' or they had not had 'dental crises' that necessitated them going to a dentist. One person said that they were 'too busy' to attend the dentist and another that they had mobility issues.

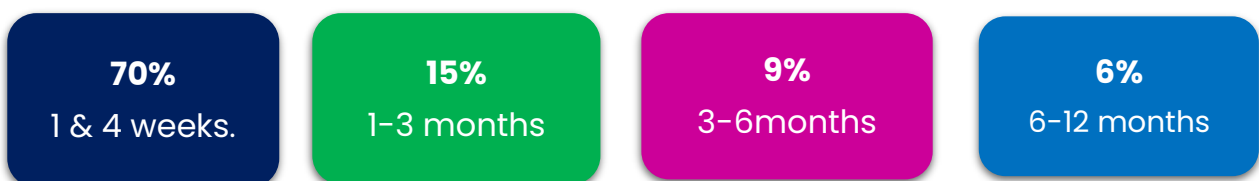
Are you still an NHS dental patient?



55% of respondents said that they were still an NHS patient with their original dentist; **14%** said that they had been removed from their practice list but had been able to register with another NHS dentist. **12%** said that they had been removed from their original NHS dentist list and have been unable to find another NHS dentist. **6%** said that they had been de-registered and had not tried to find another NHS dentist and **11%** said that they had be de-registered and had to choose to register with a private dentist. **2%** were unsure or had not tried.

How long have you had to wait for an appointment with your NHS dentist in the last 12 months?

People were asked how long they had needed to wait for an appointment with their NHS dentist.



70% of people who answered the question had waited between 1 and 4 weeks. **15%** said that they had waited for 1-3 months; **9%** had waited for 3-6 months and **6%** said that they had waited for 6-12 months for an appointment.

Were you given information or advice about how to get NHS dental care?

56% of people answering the question said that they had received information or advice about how to get NHS dental care and **44%** said that they had not.

Yes 56%

No 44%

How did you try to get the information on how to access NHS dental care?



74% of people said that they had asked their previous NHS dentist for information on how to access NHS dental care and **31%** said that they had used the NHS England website. **14%** said that they had called a local dentist themselves. **9%** said that they had used NHS 111 and **9%** said that they had asked advice from friends, family or other people.

If you were able access NHS dental care, would you be able to afford the cost?



People were asked if they would be able to afford NHS dental care if they were able to access it.

74% said that they would be able to afford all of their NHS treatment. **13%** said that they could afford some lower cost NHS dental care or treatment, **9%** said that they were not able to afford any NHS treatment or care at all.

We asked people about their employment status as part of the survey and when comparing employment status with the ability to afford dental charges **100%** of those who were self-employed said that they could afford all their NHS dental charges, **80%** of people who said that they were employed were able to afford the charges and **80%** of those who said they were retired could also afford all the charges.

Just under **8%** of people who were employed said that they could not afford any of the charges and **10%** of those who were retired said that they could not afford any charges. **14%** of people who were unemployed said that they could not afford any of the charges and just under **29%** said that they could afford the lower cost dental care; **57%** of the people who said that they were unemployed said that they would be able to afford all of the NHS dental charges for care and treatment.

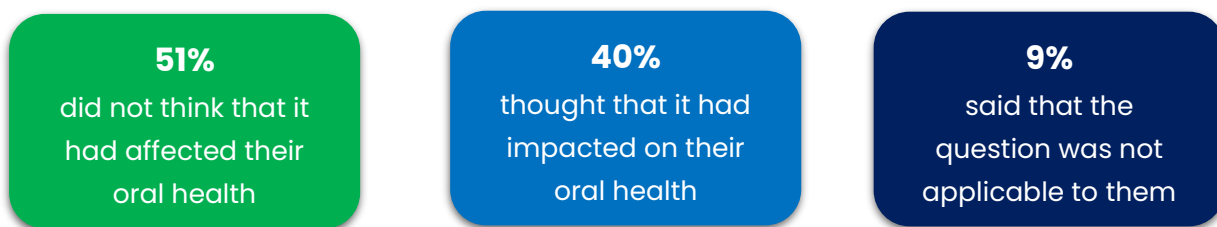
People were asked to tell us what they did to deal with any pain they might have if they are unable to access or afford NHS dental services. Most people commented that they would self-medicate using over the counter 'painkillers' such as 'ibuprofen' or 'co-codamol'.

One person said that as well as using painkillers they would also 'drink alcohol'. Other spoke of using a 'home remedy' including 'oil of cloves' or 'warm water'. One person said that they would use 'prayer' to help them.

Some people said that they would 'go to my GP' and one person said that they would 'take painkillers and then go to A&E'.

One person said that they were using their 'old dentures' and another said that they would only visit the dentist if they were in pain as it was 'unaffordable' to have regular dental care. One person said that they would 'access free dental treatment' if they needed to.

Do you think your dental hygiene or dental health has suffered as a result of being unable to access or afford NHS dental care?



When asked if they thought that their dental health or hygiene had suffered as a result of being unable to access or afford NHS dental care **51%** of people who answered the question said that they did not think that it had affected their oral health. **40%** of people said that they thought that it had impacted on their oral health. **9%** said that the question was not applicable to them.

People were asked what they thought needed to be done to improve NHS dental services. The highest number of comments were related to increasing the number of dentists in the NHS. One person commented that 'more NHS dentists are needed as so many now only do private work which is unaffordable for many. Perhaps all dentists should be required to take a percentage of NHS patients.'

Another said that 'NHS dental services should be available for all' and told how 'last year my dentist's NHS contract was dramatically reduced, and she has rightly chosen to provide the small amount of NHS care she is able to give to the most vulnerable on her caseload.'

'I now pay the same dentist privately on a Denplan contract. Treatment is a lot more costly. I have not been able to find another dentist who is taking on NHS patients.'

The need for better access for patients who were vulnerable such as 'better access for the disabled' or those who live in 'deprived areas' were also mentioned by people.

Case Example

Whilst visiting a local Learning Disabilities Hub, Healthwatch Walsall spoke to a local pensioner who needed dental care. They were not registered with a dentist. Healthwatch Walsall had recently undertaken a 'dentist' ring around to establish dental practices who were still registering NHS patients.

A dental practice was located in Blakenall, who were registering NHS patients and the contact details were passed to the carers of the pensioner so they could register and seek dental treatment.

Ward-level deprivation

Table 6: Ward-level summary measures for Walsall

Ward	2019 Rank	Av. IMD Score	Eng. Decile	2015 Rank	2010 Rank	Map Key
Blakenall	1	53.6	1	1	1	E
Birchills Leamore	2	48.9	1	2	2	D
Pleck	3	45.3	1	3	3	N
Bloxwich East	4	42.1	1	4	4	F
Darlaston South	5	40.8	1	5	5	I
Bentley & Darlaston North	6	39.2	1	7	7	C
Willenhall South	7	38.3	1	9	9	T
St Matthew's	8	38.2	1	6	8	Q
Palfrey	9	36.9	1	8	6	K
Bloxwich West	10	36.8	1	10	10	G
Brownhills	11	28.0	3	11	11	H
Short Heath	12	26.7	2	12	12	B

Blakenall is considered to be an area of deprivation.

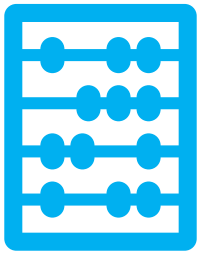
Link to Walsall areas of deprivation from Walsall Council website.

Link: <https://tinyurl.com/2ddpa7fp>

The cost of dental services was raised by a number of people with them saying that 'help should be available for people on low incomes who are working and don't claim benefits' with the same person saying that they 'probably don't go as often as I should because other bills have taken priority in order that we keep our home'. Another said that there should be 'free dental care for the elderly/low income as cost of living has gone up on everything.'

People also spoke about the need for more available appointments and shorter waiting times for appointments. There was specific mention of the need for 'more appointments for working people especially on Saturdays.'

Two people mentioned the need for dental practitioners to be more patient centred with one commenting that 'the dentist could [have] listened better to me and allowed me to explain' and another saying that dentists should 'show calmness and patience with patients to discuss their problems with them and understand how to help them more.'



Conclusion

Walsall mirrors the national picture with a fifth of people saying that they had not been able to access an NHS dentist in the last year. People are unable to find an NHS dentist taking on new patients.

43% of people said that they had been de-registered from their regular NHS dentist. **14%** had managed to find a new NHS dentist but most people had not and were left with no dentist at all or had to go to a private dentist. Waiting times for appointments were within 4 weeks for most people who took part in the survey but there were some that said that they had waited for up to 12 months to be seen by a dentist.

Affordability of even NHS dental charges was an issue amongst some employed and retired people and most people who were unemployed.

40% of people said that felt their oral health had suffered because of a lack of NHS dental care. People said that they would access over the counter painkillers to deal with pain or contact other health services such as their GP.

From our patient survey results there appears to be no evidence to suggest that people who live in areas of deprivation have any greater issues in accessing NHS dentists than the rest of the population.

People may already or may have to consider travelling further to an identified NHS dentist and this of course may impact people on lower or strained incomes.



Recommendations

Possible ideas, resolutions or considerations that may address the issue and improve access for Walsall service users.

1. It is recognised that the issues with access to NHS dental care are not unique to Walsall and that the Government have said that they are going to be publishing an NHS dentistry recovery plan, but this has not yet been published. The responsibility for contracting NHS dental care in Walsall has been passed to the Black Country ICB and therefore, there is a need for them to act on the issues around capacity at least in the short term.
2. There are issues around understanding the registration process for NHS dental services and therefore it is recommended that there is consistency of approach from

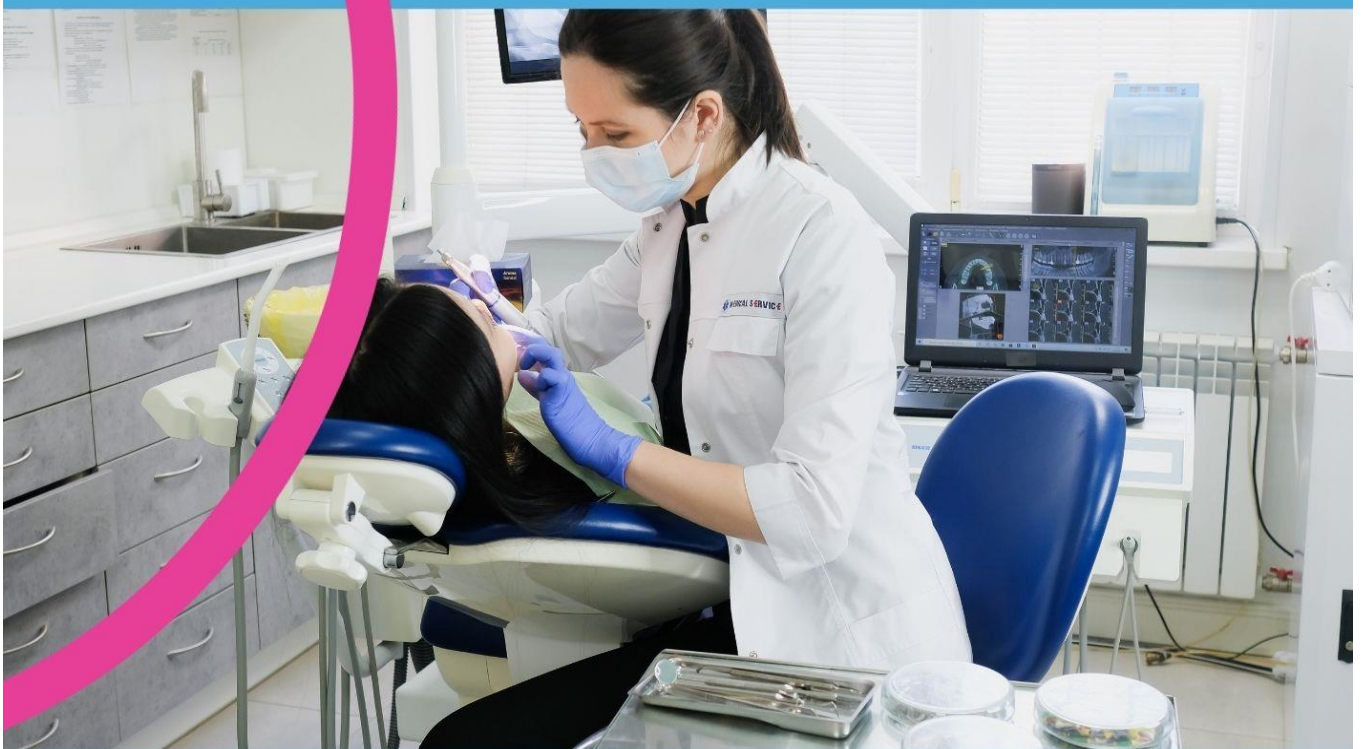
dental practices offering NHS treatment and that this is communicated to the public both by the ICB and the relevant dental practices.

3. It is recommended that NHS dental practices offer flexibility in appointment times to ensure that people who are at work are able to access appointments.
4. It is recommended that both the ICB and dental practices ensure that there is publicly available information about how to access dental care in the event of an urgent or emergency need, making use of NHS 111 to ensure that people are not contacting already stretched services at GP practices or Accident and Emergency departments.
5. Patients who are no longer an NHS patient should consider contacting dentists around Walsall to check if they are recruiting/registering NHS patients. Availability may change from dentist to dentist as registration lists fill up.

healthwatch

Walsall

Share your health or social care services experiences
by visiting our 'Have Your Say' section of our website
<https://www.healthwatchwalsall.co.uk/share-your-views>



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