

Accessing dental services under COVID-19:  
Reviewing Brighton and Hove dental practice  
websites and out of hours telephone messages -  
Executive summary.



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## Accessing dental services under COVID-19:

### Reviewing Brighton and Hove dental practice websites and out of hours telephone messages - Executive summary.

#### Introduction

In February 2021, Healthwatch England announced a dental crisis as a result of local Healthwatch, including Brighton and Hove, sharing concerns from local people trying to access dental services during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, people told us that unlike other medical services, access to dental care was limited, particularly for NHS services. We also ran an online survey which confirmed what we were hearing elsewhere. To read the full findings from this 2020 survey, please visit our website here: <https://www.healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk/report/2021-01-12/dental-services-during-covid-19>

The next obvious step for us was to look at the information being provided to people. Therefore, in January this year, we reviewed the COVID-19 related advice given to people on all 43 Brighton and Hove NHS dental practice websites<sup>2</sup> and in the telephone messages heard when calling the same dental practices out of normal hours. We also looked at the website and out of hours message associated with the Brighton & Hove Emergency Dental service.

#### Methodology

Healthwatch staff and volunteers reviewed dental practice websites and made phone calls to the same dental practices out of normal hours (before 8am or after 6pm). The reviews and phone calls were made concurrently over a two-week period between 2nd - 14th February 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Each volunteer reviewing **dental practice websites** was asked to answer the same core set of questions. These covered services available, advice on visiting the practice, emergency signposting and quality checks. If the dental practice did not have a website or if the website had no information about accessing services during COVID-19, the review ended.

Volunteers conducting **phone calls to dental practices out of hours** were asked another set of core questions about the COVID-19 related information provided in the message left for patients. These questions covered services available, COVID-

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<sup>1</sup> To read Healthwatch England's report, please see:

<https://www.healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk/news/2020-12-15/dentistry-impact-covid>.

<sup>2</sup> NHS England provided us with the information on the 43 dental practices in Brighton and Hove.

<sup>3</sup> Phone calls were carried out between 2nd - 14th February 2021; Web reviews were made between 2nd - 6th February 2021.

19 procedures and emergency signposting. If the dental practice did not have any telephone message, the review ended.

The headlines shown below are grouped into three sections: Website review; Out of hours messages review; and Comparative analysis. This third section is drawn from comparing findings between the website review and out of hours messages review. It covers three areas: Availability of information; Availability of service-specific information; and Availability of advice on emergency services and COVID-19 related information.

## Headlines

### Website Review

- Almost one half (47%) of all Brighton and Hove NHS dental practices either did not have a website, did not provide COVID-19 related information or advised they were not open during lockdown:
  - Four practices do not have a website.
  - 12 practices do not provide any information to patients regarding services under COVID-19.
  - Four practices are not open during lockdown.
- The Brighton & Hove NHS Emergency Dental Service website has no mention of COVID-19 specifically or how dental services are affected as a result of the pandemic.

Of the 23 practices that we could review COVID-19 related information, we found:

- Ten practices (43%) either do not offer routine appointments or do not make it clear what type of appointment/care is being offered.
- 16 practices (70%) do not mention anything about prioritising either appointments or patients.
- Almost one half of the websites (10) did not provide any information to new patients; A further five practices only offered availability to private patients.
- Only four websites provided information on where to go in the case of an NHS emergency.
- Seven practices were not transparent about the information being up-to-date.
- Four websites<sup>4</sup> provided a date that indicated they had not updated their COVID-19 information for at least six months.

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<sup>4</sup> Five practices out of the 14 who had provided the date their COVID-19 information was last updated were dated in 2020, with one of these dated November 2020.

## Out of hours messages Review

- Three practices did not have an out of hours (OOH) message.

Of the 40 practices that we could review COVID-19 related information, we found:

- Only five practices were explicit in their message, about offering routine appointments.
- Only seven practices were explicit about offering urgent appointments.
- Only one practice was explicit in their message, about being open for new patients.
- Over one quarter of practices (11) did not provide people with advice on what to do in the case of an emergency.

In addition to the practice OOH message, we rang the Brighton & Hove NHS Emergency Dental service. The daytime message only offers advice and no face-to-face appointments; the out of hours message refers to the daytime number or to go to A&E.

## Comparative analysis

Comparing COVID-19 information from both websites and OOH messages across all 43 dental practices (where this was available), we found:

### Availability of information was poor:

- Four practices advised they were not open on their website but were not clear about this in their OOH messages;
- Two practices did not have COVID-19 related information in either their OOH message or on their website;
- 15 practices had COVID-19 related information only in one place, either on their website or in their OOH message.

### Availability of service-specific information was lacking:

- None of the practices provided information in both their OOH message *and* on their website about the following: availability of routine and urgent appointments and availability for new patients.
- 18 practices did not provide any of this information - either the information was unavailable (no OOH message, no website or no COVID-19 information) or it was not specified within the COVID-19 information.
- Five practices did not provide information on either urgent appointments or availability for new patients.
- 15 practices either did not provide any information on urgent appointments OR the availability for new patients.

## Availability of advice on emergency services and COVID-19 related information was poor:

- 14 practices did not provide patient advice about where to go in the case of an emergency either in their OOH message or on their website.
- 21 practices did not provide any advice on COVID-19 infection control procedures for patients visiting the practice either in their OOH message or on their website.
- Eight practices did not provide any information about emergency services, COVID-19 procedures or any indication of how up to date their information was.

## Conclusion

Local people told us their concerns about accessing dental services during the pandemic; Our review on websites and out of hours telephone messages, has confirmed those concerns.

From the start of the review, we found that almost one half of all Brighton and Hove NHS dental practices either did not have a website, did not provide COVID-19 related information or advised they were not open during lockdown. Of the 40 practices who did have an out of hours message, less than one quarter were explicit in their message, about the services they offered.

Throughout both reviews, inconsistent information was the major issue. This was notably illustrated by the lack of emergency signposting on practice websites and the lack of information on basic services across both telephone messages and practice websites.

It is recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant upheaval to the health and care system. However, GP practices and outpatient services have continued to be available to the public (albeit with some delays and special measures).

In contrast, local people in Brighton & Hove have been seriously let down by dental services during this period. Unfortunately, the local situation reflects UK-wide challenges. NHS England has been asked to respond but to date has failed to take appropriate action to address the issues with access to NHS dental care.