

NHS dentistry

Bulletin, June 2022



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A dental crisis

Requests for help to find an NHS Dentist are now the main reason people contact the Healthwatch Brighton and Hove helpline.

Healthwatch England has already declared that [NHS dentistry is in crisis](#).

They also recently published a [new survey](#) of public attitudes to NHS dentistry. This showed that half of adults in England find dental charges unfair amid escalating living costs. They have warned decision-makers that NHS dentistry is in desperate need of reform.

- 41% of people who responded to the survey said they found it difficult to book an NHS dental appointment, whilst 20% couldn't access all the treatments they needed.
- 24% said they had to pay privately to get all the required treatment.
- 17% reported they felt pressured to pay privately when they booked their dental appointment. And 17% said their NHS dentist didn't explain the costs before starting treatment.

Fewer NHS dentists

- The above findings come as more than 2,000 dentists quit the NHS last year, according to recent data obtained by the [Association of Dental Groups](#), suggesting a growing trend toward private provision.
- Between 2019 and 2021, the number of dentists in the Brighton and Hove Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) area fell from 187 to 168.

In review

Behind the current crisis



Vital reforms to the **current NHS dental contract** have been delayed.

Staffing shortages mean there are fewer dentists.

The NHS '**find a dentist**' website has **poor and out of date information**.

COVID-19 created **large backlogs** of patients waiting for treatment.

Read more on pages 4-5

Listening to you



141 people shared their experiences of dentists with us in 2021.

We saw a **271% increase** in dental queries between 2020 to 2021.

Your top query was about how to find an NHS dentist.

Read more on pages 6-8.

Making a difference



We produced a **patient guide** to explain your rights.

We asked **12 questions in Parliament** with the help of a local MP.

We routinely attend two important meetings with local dentists.

We **answered over 200 of your dental queries** and offered advice to you through our helpline.

We gathered **50 of your views** about using dentists during the pandemic and **reviewed all 43 dental practice websites**.

Read more on pages 9-11.

Contact us

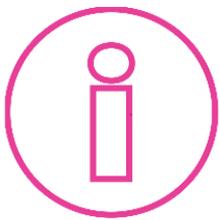
Information Line

01273 234 040 or email

info@healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk

What is behind the current crisis?

Long before COVID-19 hit, people were contacting us to ask for help accessing NHS dental treatment. They also shared with us their experiences of receiving sometimes poor treatment and concerns around misleading pricing. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly worsened many of these existing problems.



Did you know that all dentists are private businesses, and that they opt into provide NHS treatment? The current NHS contract sets out strict criteria governing what and how many NHS treatments dentists can provide. NHS dental care is subsidised by the government. This means that some of the cost of looking after your teeth has already been paid for.

The impact of COVID-19: fewer appointments and large backlogs

In the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, NHS England required dentists to shut their doors, meaning that face to face appointments were only possible for the most urgent cases. Dentists switched to providing advice and treatments by telephone. Hospitals remained open but only saw patients with an urgent clinical need. Restricting the number of face-to-face appointments and treatments was intended to help reduce the spread of the virus and protect staff and patients.

The availability of dental appointments was also affected by dental practices needing to follow stricter hygiene procedures. This included deep cleaning treatment rooms between patients, which could take up to 45 minutes each time. These enhanced hygiene measures impacted the number of patients which dental practices could see in a working day. In some cases, dental practices are still following stricter hygiene measures to minimise the risk of spreading COVID-19. Only recently have routine pre-COVID cleaning procedures, been reinstated.

From June 2020, face to face consultations resumed in smaller numbers, but services are still having to work through the large backlog of cases that built up during the lockdowns.

Things are improving, but the number of available face to face dental appointments remains lower than it was before the pandemic.

Delays to contractual reforms

For well over a decade, governments of all political parties have been talking about NHS contract reform for dentistry, but it has never come to fruition. The latest discussions on dental system reform began in the summer of 2021 but change is not expected until 2023 at the earliest. The current contract is often described as being 'broken' and it is driving some clinicians out of NHS dentistry.

We have learned from speaking to local dentists, and from the Healthwatch network that:

- Some dental practices are handing back their NHS contracts. These practices have gone private and the lost NHS activity has not been replaced.
- the current NHS contract sets payment limits that can be awarded to dentists for the work they carry out. These limits were set in 2006, and whilst they have increased every year, NHS dental charges have increased by a greater percentage. Consequently, whenever practices treat a paying NHS patient the dentist may end up owing the NHS money.
- many younger dentists are not willing to work under the current conditions imposed by the NHS contract and are more inclined to want to work part-time.
- Brexit and the pandemic have led to overseas dentists returning home and new ones are not replacing them in sufficient numbers.
- many older dentists are now of retirement age, r choosing to retire early.
- all of this has led to a recruitment problem.

Poor patient information

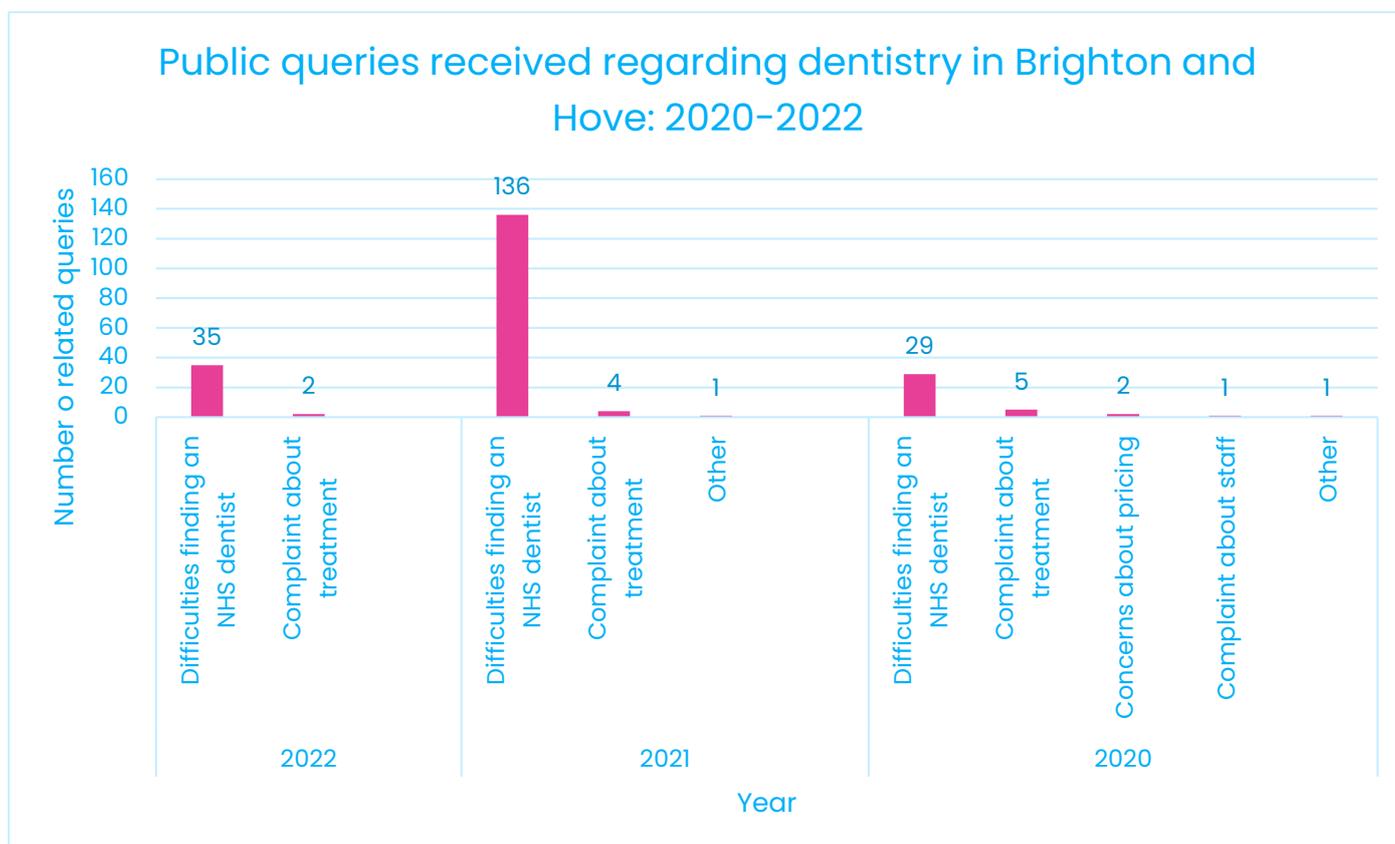
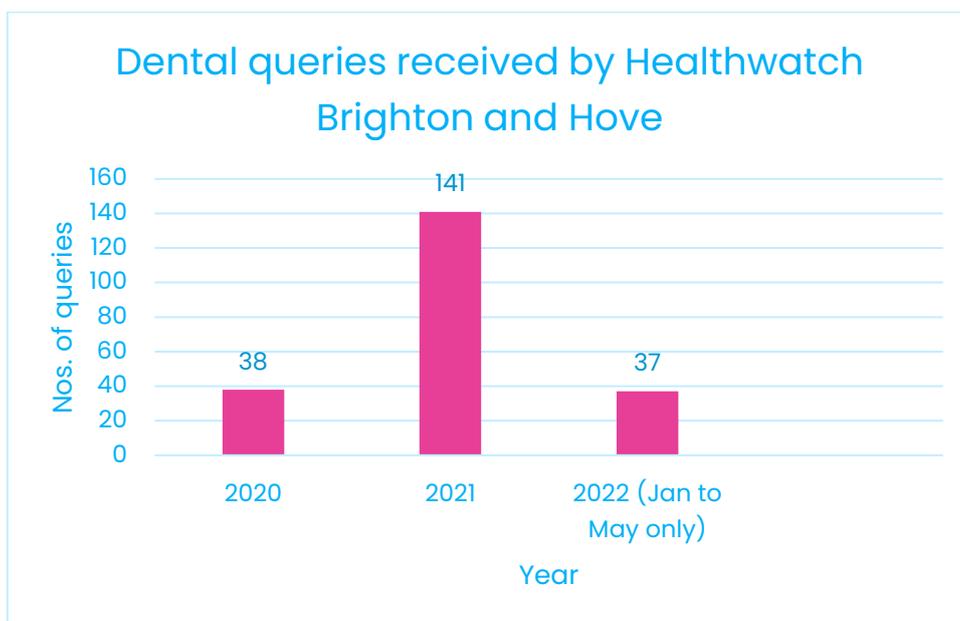
Members of the public are advised to use the NHS website to [search for a dentist near you](#). The is also meant to provide information on which dental practices are currently accepting new patients, whether they offer urgent appointments, and how other people have rated the service.

With the help of a local MP, we recently asked a question in Parliament and found that only 47% of dental practices have updated their information on the NHS website. This means that when patients look, they can't find accurate or helpful information about which practices are seeing NHS patients. It remains unclear why all dental practices are not making these simple updates so that patients do not waste their time searching.

Your dental concerns

Queries we received

The number of queries we received from you about dentistry rose by an astonishing 271% between 2020 to 2021. In 2022 alone, we have already received almost the same number of queries as in the whole of 2020.



As can be seen in the second chart, difficulties in accessing NHS dentistry have always been the main reason why people have contacted us, even before COVID-19. But after COVID hit, those queries quadrupled, and remain at high levels. People contact us not only to seek help for themselves, but also for refugees, young children and people with additional support needs.

Our helpline



Our dedicated helpline is run by two Healthwatch volunteers, Fran and Elaine, and they have been responding to your dental queries. Your key questions to us have been around access to NHS dentistry and cost.

“Do you know of any dentists in or near Brighton accepting NHS patients? My husband registered our family as NHS patients with Preston Circus Dental Practice, but when I went today, they said they could only take me as a private patient because I haven't been there for the last two years. This is largely because of the pandemic. I have a missing filling which urgently needs replacing. I have called about 15 dentists listed on the NHS website and been told none of them can take me as an NHS patient. Can you help? Grateful for any help you can provide.” (May 2022)



“I am trying to find an NHS dentist in Brighton and I have called around 30 practices on the NHS dentist list, but none are taking on new patients >18 years.” (May 2022)



Personal stories: Forced to go private



“I would like to complain about the lack of honesty with the information provided to the find an NHS dentist service. Both St George’s Dental and North Laines Dental Practice have provided information that they are taking on new patients yet contacting them the day they provided this information I was informed by both that this is not the case and was given a private price list by St George’s Dental. I’ve been on a waiting list for Wellsbourne Dental for 2 days short of a year and have issues with wisdom teeth that have required three trips to the out of hours dentist this year alone.” (May 2022)



NHS website unhelpful

“Neither my partner or I have had a dentist since the pandemic started and have found it so difficult to find an NHS dentist in the Brighton and Hove surrounding areas for many years.” (May 2022)

This person:

- called numerous dentists in Brighton and the surrounding area
- searched the NHS website but found it was not updated
- had been given emergency treatment but only as a temporary solution
- were suffering in pain
- didn’t know what else to do.

Action taken by Healthwatch

What action have we been taking?



Collecting your views

In 2021, we asked for your experiences of using dental services during the COVID-19 pandemic. You can read our report [here](#)

The main headlines from this survey were as follows:

- 81% understood mostly or in full, the advice they received or explanation of the treatment they needed from the dentist they contacted.
- 52% found it easy or very easy to find out information about how COVID-19 was affecting dental services.
- 60% found it difficult or very difficult to find an NHS dental service to help them.
- 57% understood how much they would be charged before they received any advice and/or treatment; 17% did not.
- 52% felt they waited longer to see a dentist/other dental professional than pre-COVID-19, whilst 59% were dissatisfied with waiting times.

In 2021, we also undertook a review of dental websites and out of hours telephone messages and found a lack of consistency around opening times, COVID-19 information and the availability of routine and urgent appointments. Read our report [here](#).

We continue to collect your experiences which we use to get questions asked in Parliament and to share with local dental committees and NHS England.

Answering your questions

We always try our best to answer your query. We will also direct you to further sources of help and advise you if you need to make a complaint. Where possible, we can tell you of local dentists who have advised that they are taking on new NHS patients.

Personal stories: Success

We helped a heavily pregnant woman having trouble accessing dental treatment. She was in a lot of pain and had been refused by several practices. We signposted her to a dental practice who was accepting new patients and she managed to get treated by an NHS dentist. (April 2022)

Creating a dental guide to help you

Your feedback helped us to understand that many members of the public, including those who regularly attend dental services, are not clear on what dentistry services are available via the NHS, what treatment is included and what charges apply.

In response, Healthwatch across Sussex (Brighton & Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex) worked together with local dental organisations on a detailed guide to help everyone get the treatment they need.

This explains:

- The impact of COVID-19 on NHS dental appointments.
- The difference between NHS and private dental care.
- How to find and register with an NHS dentist.
- NHS dental charges and exemptions (correct as of June 2021).
- How to feedback or complain about a dental service.
- Useful links and emergency dental services.

You can access our [guide here](#)

Working with local dentists

With the dedicated help of our volunteer Chris, we attend two important local dental meetings, both represented by local dentists and practitioners. This allows us to ask questions directly of those delivering dental services, but also to better understand the pressures dentists are facing. This has helped us to appreciate the demands they are experiencing as described above. At the same time, these practitioners are left in no doubt as to the human impact of the current dental crisis.



“East Sussex Local Dental Committee has had the pleasure of working with Healthwatch. Our meetings have given us the opportunity to acknowledge and understand the concerns of the local population of Brighton and Hove with regards to their dental care. These meetings have also provided a platform for to provide feedback on the conditions of the dental work force and the restrictions in the delivery of dental care due to the pandemic and infection control protocols (May 2022)

– Chair, East Sussex Local Dental Committee.



Working with a local MP

Healthwatch has been working closely with Caroline Lucas MP's team in Brighton over the past year as she has a strong interest what is happening to NHS dentistry. With their support, we have asked 12 questions of the Minister responsible for dentistry provision.

Read our 12 questions asked in Parliament about dentistry services [here](#).

These questions are based on your experiences which you have shared with us, and information we have gathered from other sources such as the South East Local Dental Committee, a group who represent dental practices in the area. Some of our questions seek further information on Government announcements. All the questions are publicly available on the [UK Parliament website](#).

We will continue to raise questions on your behalf and push for reform and better availability of NHS services.

By asking these questions we have learned that:

- just 47% of all dentists have up-to-date information on the NHS website.
- the number of dental contractors in Brighton and Hove has reduced from 187 in 2018/19 to 168 in 2020/21.
- the government does not know the number of children in Brighton and Hove who were unable to see an NHS dentist in the last 12 months.
- the government has not undertaken any assessment of the number and proportion of dental practices in Brighton and Hove that are having problems delivering current NHS contractual requirements.
- the government does not yet know how much of the additional £50million extra spending, announced in January this year, was spent. This money was intended to support dentists to deliver more NHS appointments. A total available spend of £6,887,000 was allocated to the South East region.
- the development of further long-term changes to dentistry will progress during summer and autumn 2022, but no firm date to announce any final changes is yet known.
- patients are not registered on an ongoing basis with NHS dentists (as they are with GPs), but that patients receiving NHS dental care are only registered whilst they are undergoing a course of treatment.



"I have worked closely with Healthwatch over the past year, particularly on dental issues. Their expertise, experience and professionalism have been invaluable to me in my work scrutinising Ministers. Thank you to David, Alan and all the brilliant Healthwatch team!" (May 2022)



CAROLINE LUCAS, MP

Our next steps

Using your feedback, we will

- Continue to share your stories with Healthwatch England, NHS England and local dental practitioners.
- Continue to ask questions of the Minister responsible for dentistry, with the help of local MPs.
- Continue to work with local dental groups to understand the issues they face, and to put your questions to them.
- Work with the newly formed [Integrated Care System in Sussex](#) which from 1st July, will assume responsibility for commissioning dental provision locally. We will ensure they understand what reforms are needed and press for more NHS dental provision (the ICS is a new way of working across health and care in Sussex intended to bring long term benefits to local people- read more [here](#)).
- Continue to help you by answering your questions and providing advice.

Contact us

Information Line

We can provide you with information on local health or social care services and signpost you if you want to raise a complaint.

01273 234 040 or email

info@healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk



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