



Dental Services During COVID-19

January 2021

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1. Introduction

Details of Report:

Overview	This report presents the experiences of local people accessing dental services during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/21. It is an independent evaluation of the experiences of people using the services in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and responses from dental practices during the pandemic. Recommendations for improvements and developments form part of the report.
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1.1. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the local people who took time out to participate and provide Healthwatch with their thoughts and experiences.

1.2. Disclaimer

Our report is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all service users and staff, only an account of what was contributed at the time of undertaking this project.

2. About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Barking and Dagenham are an independent champion for people using local health and social care services. We listen to people's positive experience of services and act as a critical friend to services in areas which could be improved. We share local people's views with those with the power to make change happen. We also share these views with Healthwatch England, the national body, to help improve the quality of services across the country. People can also speak to us to find information about health and social care services available locally.

Our sole purpose is to help make health and care better for people.

In summary - Local Healthwatch is here to:

- help people find out about local health and social care services,
- listen to what people think of services,
- help improve the quality of services by letting those running services and the government know what people want from care,
- encourage people running services to involve people in changes to care.

Everything that Healthwatch Barking & Dagenham does brings the voice and influence of local people to the development and delivery of local services, putting local people at the heart of decision-making processes.

3. Background

COVID 19 has meant that local health and care services have had to change the way they deliver services and in most cases the number of patients they see to ensure they are COVID secure and following guidance. This has affected access to a number of services. One of the significant issues that people raised locally was about access to NHS dentistry in Barking and Dagenham.

As COVID-19 restrictions were eased, a number of local residents who were struggling to access both urgent and routine dental care contacted Healthwatch Barking and Dagenham.

Two main issues residents told us about included:

Not being able to register with a dental practice as they were told that the practice were not accepting new registrations. Patients who were on a dental practices list were unable to get treatment in a timely manner and were to waiting weeks for some treatments not deemed to be an emergency .

There are three main reasons this issue needs to be resolved:

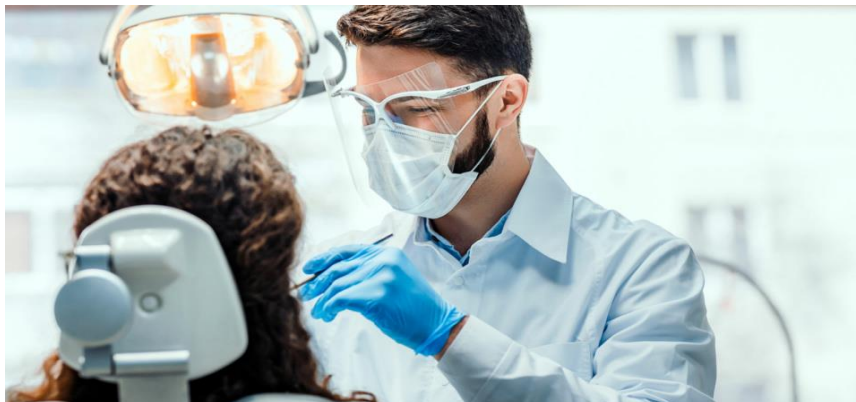
- People will end up trying to access urgent dental care through NHS 111.
- Individuals who would like to book a routine check-up will end up not being able to find a dentist prepared to give treatment. The delay in seeing a dentist will mean any dental issues will not be identified and could lead to other health complications, and this could have financial implications for patients.
- A greater economic impact on local NHS services in the end, and lack of a preventative approach to dental care.

Health and care services are working hard to deal with COVID-19, but if access to NHS dental care is not improved, people risk facing far greater dental problems in the future, but it also puts pressure on already overstretched hospitals and GPs.

4. Methodology

Healthwatch created an online survey seeking the views of local people who had experienced dental services at this time and looked into areas including:

- Issues with registering with a dental practice- if they could-if they could not? If they could not, what they did next?
- The experiences of anyone who has accessed dental practices during the pandemic.
- On Facebook, Healthwatch engaged with local people through the local community page, speaking about their experiences and gathering their comments. Also, Healthwatch carried out anonymous mystery shopper calls at 20 dental practices in Barking & Dagenham, to find out if they were registering new patients and offering appointments.



5. Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic over the summer, while some restrictions were lifted, local people struggled when it came to accessing routine care.

One of the significant issues that local people have raised with Healthwatch, is about access to NHS dental services.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on many areas of NHS services and problems in local dental care appear to be of particular concern. Before the pandemic, people in Barking and Dagenham were not telling local Healthwatch there were any concerns about accessing NHS dental appointments. During the summer months of COVID 19, one of the main concerns residents reported, was being unable to register with NHS dentists, despite ringing around and trying to book appointments.

This was frustrating for people - being referred from dental practices to other local dental practices – to be told the same information and also discovering that only Emergency appointments that were already subject to delays, were being scheduled. People have said that they have been left in pain and discomfort as a result. According to NHS England, patients aren't required to register with a dental practice, yet dental practices in Barking and Dagenham are telling them they need to register.

Some Individuals told Healthwatch they were offered the option of having private treatment, but for many this is not an affordable option, highlighting the inequality in getting access to good quality dental care in Barking and Dagenham. Although good public health focuses on prevention, locally, residents are having problems with getting an appointment.

Health and care services are working hard to deal with COVID-19, but we believe the NHS in Barking & Dagenham should give more attention to resolving issues in dentistry.

From the responses Healthwatch received from local people, it has highlighted challenges in accessing dental services. Some individuals have said the service has worked well for them – being able to get a quick appointment at one NHS practice in Dagenham – The Heathway Dental Surgery - and where the NHS 111 service dealt well with people's calls.

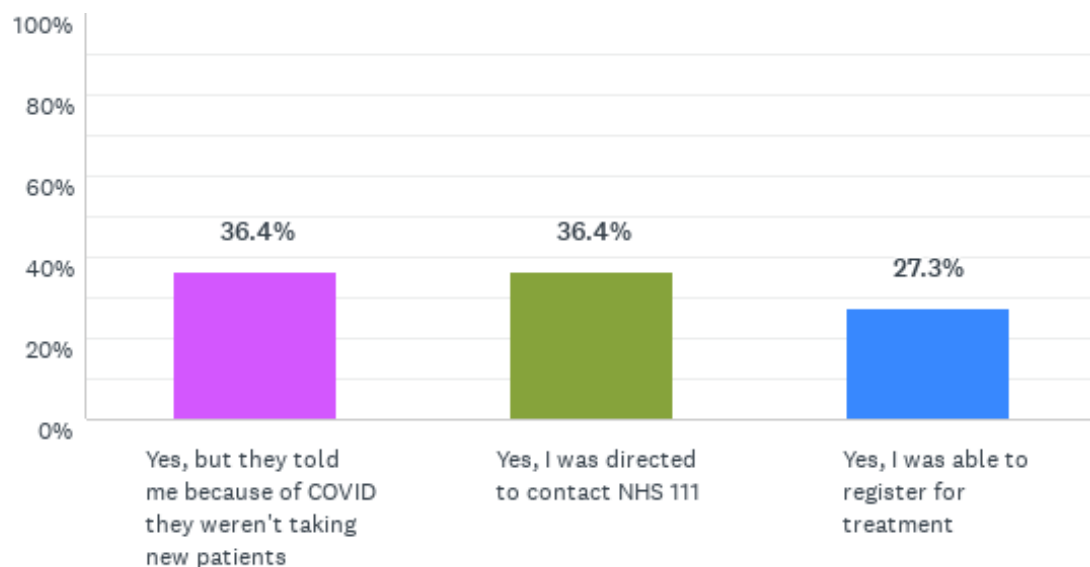
Residents need to be able to access both routine and urgent dental care in a timely manner, which is also affordable in a tough economic climate. This will support and prevent other parts of the local health economy having to pick up the care and higher costs of other health risks caused by poor dental health.

Without improved access to NHS dental care, not only do people in the borough risk facing far greater dental problems in the future, but it also puts more pressure on already overstretched hospital and GP services. Untreated dental problems can lead to pain, infection, and the risk of long-term harm, which is comparable with other medical conditions. People with dental needs must be able to access the care they are entitled to.

6. Residents' Responses

There were 12 individuals who responded to the survey. Their responses are cited below.

6.1. Have you tried to register with a dentist during the last 9 months?

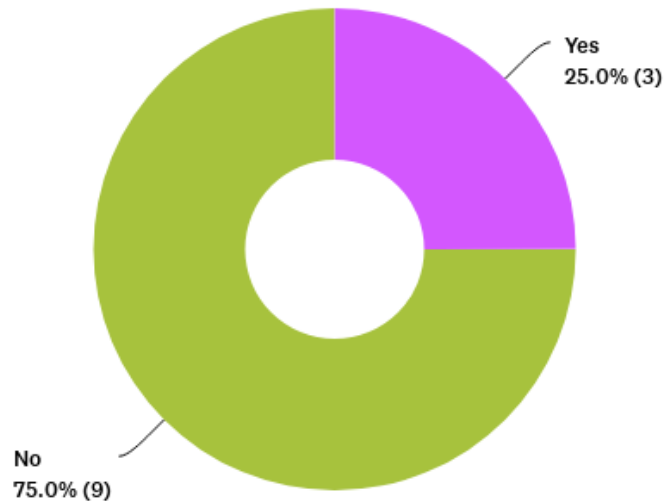


Less than a third of people that contacted a dental surgery was able to register for treatment. Almost 73% of the individuals that needed treatment were either referred to NHS 111 or were informed that a practice wasn't taking on new patients because of COVID 19. Feedback from a resident cited that they was "taken off the dental register, due to not having seen their dentist in a long while" and that they was told "I could re-register after 18 months!"

The NHS website contradicts this, stating that people don't need to register with a Dentist. The message to the public is one of confusion and misinformation. Referring people to NHS 111; patients aren't clear that this call is only for people who require emergency dental treatment.

Healthwatch sought to find out if NHS Dental services received more funding to see patients during the COVID lockdown. From March to June 2020, their funding was reduced as services ceased face to face activity other than for emergencies at chosen Hub sites. From June 2020, when restrictions were lifted, their funding returned to current contractual arrangements. Advice from the Chief Dental Officer as services resumed, was for NHS services to take into account the urgency of needs; the particular unmet needs of vulnerable groups and their available capacity to undertake activity. (Reference: [Dental Preparedness - 13/07/20](#))

6.2. Have you found it easy to find out clear information about when local dental services are open for appointments?



The majority of people (75%) trying to get reliable information about access to their local dental practice, indicated that they struggled to do so. Lack of available appointments, frustration at trying to contact a practice by phone for days and individuals being turned away if their need wasn't deemed an emergency. Collectively, this shows a lack of good service at a time when people need it to work well for them.

There appears to be an emphasis on appointments being undertaken for emergencies; a person pointed out how good the NHS 111 service was at finding them an emergency appointment only.

Healthwatch went onto the Barking and Dagenham CCG website to find out about local dental services. It was over 3 years out of date and offered no accurate information that might be useful for local people seeking to find out current information.

Comments from local residents

'The dentists are all doing their own thing!'

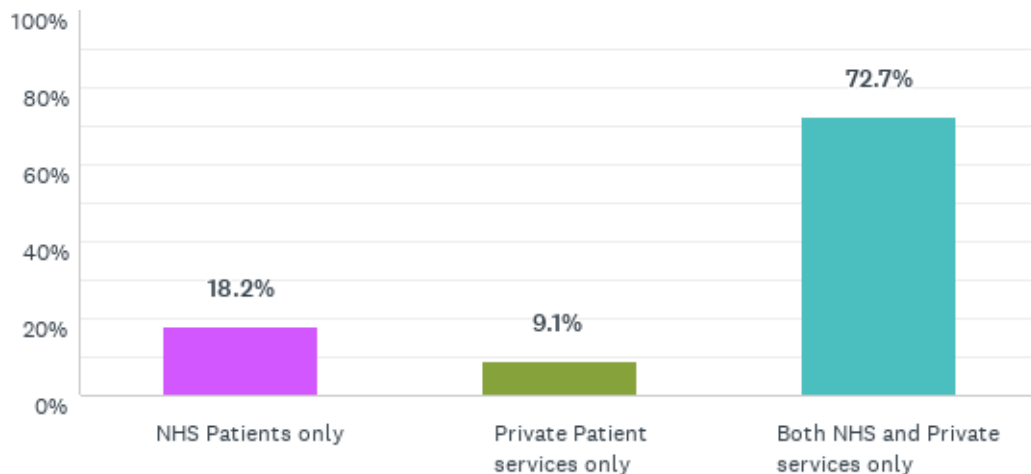
'NHS 111 really good, they always find you an appointment, but more to do with emergency appointments!'

'Did get back through, but unable to book an appointment as they were all gone.'

'I could not get through on the phone to them for three days. It just kept going through to voicemail or cut off! When I did finally get through, I was told the dentist would ring me back, unfortunately that was another nightmare as my phone was not accepting the private number and didn't ring, just went to my voicemail.'

'I phoned my dentist to ask if they were making appointments, but it's just emergencies only.'

6.3. If you contacted a local dental service, what service did they offer?



Overall, 91% of dental practices in the borough offer NHS services and 82% offer privately paid services. This shows that potentially, there is a high offer of affordable services for people in the borough and private treatment for those who can afford it. A high proportion – almost 73% of practices – offer both NHS and Private services. People’s experiences of the offer of services varies between practices. Some individuals have indicated that they can’t get a service, while some have said how good the service has been from practices they use. One individual cited how delays caused them pain to the point they took their own action to repair their teeth! NHS commissioned Dental services can refuse a patient treatment in some circumstances, or if legislation is put in place to prevent delivery of a normal service. Practices are not allowed to give priority to private patients over those needing NHS services.

Comments from local residents

‘Was taken off the dental register, due to not having seen the dentist in a long while. Someone answered back to that saying I could re-register after 18 months!’

‘Had trouble with getting a dental appointment, the phones kept ringing with no answer’

‘On the corner of Hedges man’s Road and Heathway, he has been my dentist for the last 30 years and is brilliant. Dagenham Dental Surgery!’

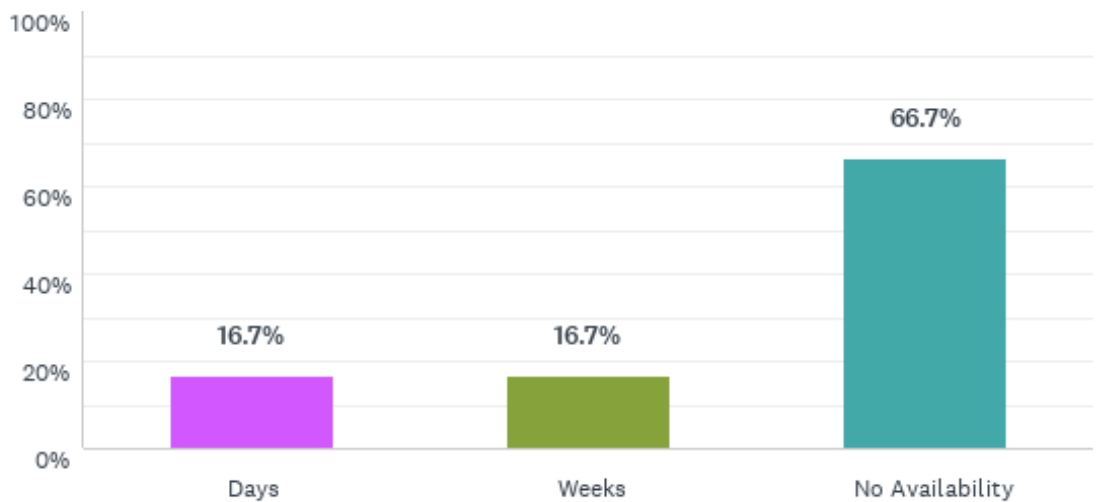
‘On many occasions, I have been taking painkillers and filling in my teeth myself with a repair kit. They are not being very helpful at all.’

‘I had an appointment in May 2020 to have a wisdom tooth taken out. They put it back until August and then it got cancelled to November. I got a text to say about coming in November, but unfortunately I couldn’t do that date, as I have to go and have an operation the day after they wanted to take my tooth out, which I have to be put under sedation for.’

‘The dentist went through all COVID questions, and then said we could have an appointment for the next week. I was told it would be an assessment, only first appointment.’

‘Not sure. I am NHS but perhaps they offer both. I haven't had an appointment since last year.’

6.4. How long were you told you would have to wait for an appointment?



Almost 67% of respondents said there was no availability for an appointment. In equal measure, some waited days, whilst others said they had to wait weeks. In one example, the person was told to contact the practice in May 2021 for an appointment! Given the capacity for services being offered in the borough, this raises concerns of a disparity between the potential offer and the reality for local people when trying to get appointments.

Comments from local residents

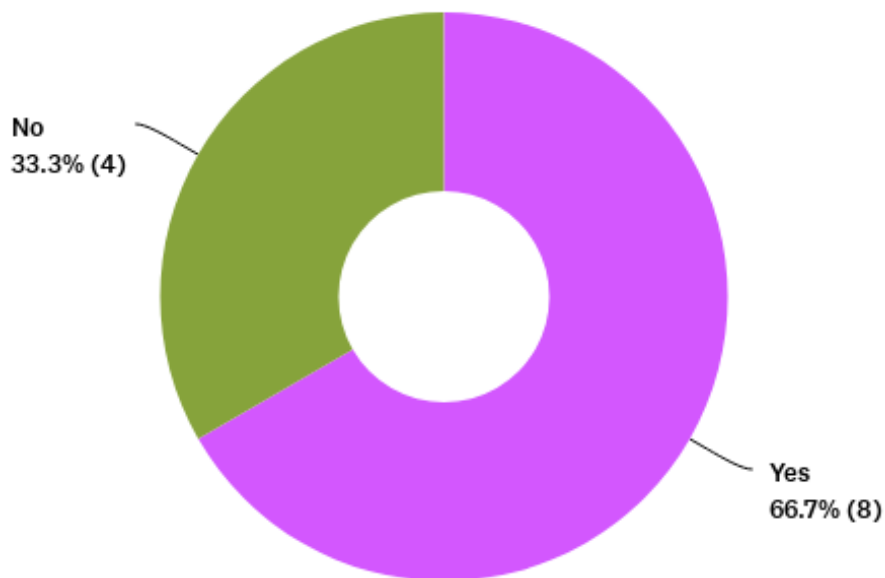
‘Not all dentists are the same, there must be more to that than meets the eye.’

‘I had an appointment for the dentist, who then said I needed to be referred to Whalebone Lane to have two teeth taken out. I didn’t hear nothing from Whalebone Lane so I rang back my dentist, to then be told my paperwork had gone missing and I would have to pay again. That was three weeks later. This was in May this year. I am still waiting to see what they are going to do now, regarding taking my teeth out.’

‘Whilst in the room the dentist assessed her teeth, was talking about what has been happening, like everyone does nowadays, revolves around our current situation. The dentist, then did carry out the work that needed to be done for my granddaughter, and was very pleasant and efficient at her job. My granddaughter has to go back in 6 months for a check-up. I did ask her if I could sign up at the dentist, she said not at this current time, they are not taking any new patients on, try and register next year in May 2021!’

‘Emergencies only.’

6.5. Has your health been affected by not getting a Dentist appointment?



In response, 67% of people said their health, both physically and mentally; was affected by not being able to get a dental appointment. Some tried methods to self-manage the pain, another took drastic action to extract their own tooth! Affecting individuals mentally to the point where they didn't eat properly and that the pain was unbearable to deal with. People shouldn't be suffering because the service isn't meeting their needs at a time when they needed it.

Comments from local residents

'I had to get strong pain killers and been using oil of cloves.'

'Agony, in the end the tooth was pulled out by my husband.'

'Emergency appointment.'

'I can't eat properly.'

'The pain is unbearable at times.'

'She said if I have gas and air they could do it at the end of December. I asked why, and she said because they haven't got or had the PPE for these times. So I have ended up taking the December appointment, as I couldn't stand the pain any longer.'

'I don't think I have any problems, but usually have regular check-ups and I'm over-due for that, but not having any toothache or anything so hopefully nothing wrong.'

6.6. Would you like to tell us more about your experience of using dental services at this time during COVID?

There is a sense of anger and frustration from the people who responded. Some because of the negative perception that they have from their experiences due to a lack of good information and communication. This seems to be happening exclusively where people access NHS services. Yet with a Private service, people can get an appointment either the same day or day after, where PPE isn't a problem and the issues pertaining to COVID 19, used for NHS services when delaying or denying an appointment; don't affect services offered privately. In one example, a local practice that provides both NHS and Private appointments, said they were not taking on any more NHS patients, but they could offer private appointments for the following day.

Comments from local residents

'Disgusting, no one cares.'

'My answer would be offensive. Useless money grabbers when you needed them most!'

'It was good service by 111.'

'Rubbish what service.'

'They have left me in the dark, terrible service.'

'It's been very poor.'

'When we got there we were told to use the hand sanitiser, and go and sit on the chair, which out of 10 chairs, only two were to be used the other were taped off. There were other people waiting, but they were outside. There seemed to be a few people walking around with their PPE on, and kept going to the front desk, and talking to the receptionist. After about half an hour, we were called in to see the dentist.'

'Have not been able to, but not urgent.'

6.7. Case study: The impact of not getting the right dental treatment –Mrs N.

I called my local practice where I am a registered patient, as I was experiencing mild toothache. I was advised that the dental practice could not carry out aerosol generating treatment due to COVID-19 restrictions, so they extended an upcoming appointment to 9th September with the view that this treatment would likely be available by then.

In the early hours, I woke with excruciating pain which worsened through the day and I experienced swelling around the lower jaw. Late afternoon I called NHS 111 who had a dental consultant call me back. This person advised that there isn't any emergency treatment in the local area until 9am minimum the following day and gave me a number to call, which I did.

The pain got worse by the evening and a NHS 111 call left me with no option but to go to A&E which I was advised would be a long wait as it would not be treated as a priority and they probably would just give me stronger pain killer and so it would be best if I sat it out until morning.

I managed to see an emergency dentist who advised I would need root canal to treat a suspected tooth abscess. They referred me back to my dentist with a prescription for antibiotics which I immediately got and started to take. I tried different times the following day from 8.45 am to get through to my dentist and it went to voicemail straight away.

Eventually, late afternoon, someone picked up the phone as I was leaving a message and said they couldn't provide any more emergency appointments that day and to call in the morning to book an appointment. That evening, I noticed a red patch down my neck and called NHS 111 again. The doctor I spoke to advised I had developed cellulitis and prescribed stronger painkillers and additional antibiotics which my husband collected immediately, and I started to take straight away.

I called my dentist in the morning and the receptionist arranged a call back. The dentist was reluctant to see me but offered to have a quick look. I went and she said I did need urgent treatment, but was unable to do root canal, and referred me back to the emergency dentist - who called me and said the best option was an extraction at my own dentist.

I called my dentist and she said that they could not do an extraction due to the swelling and she didn't think the anaesthetic would work. By the afternoon I had developed a temperature and tried calling my own GP for advice and was told that the best option would be to try NHS 111 or go to A&E as they didn't have capacity to call me back even though it was an emergency.

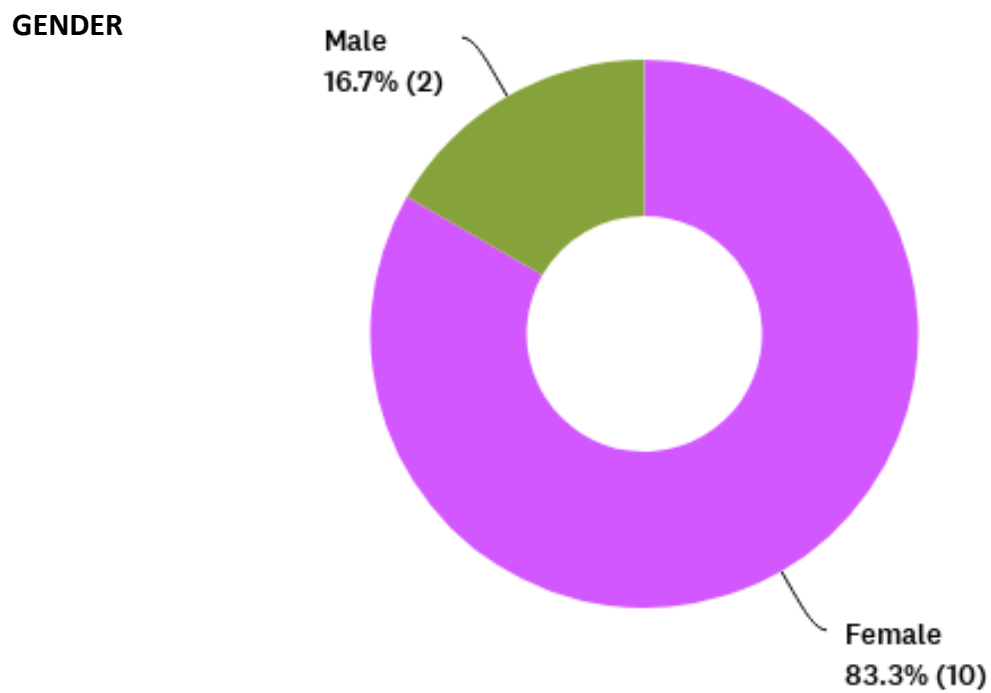
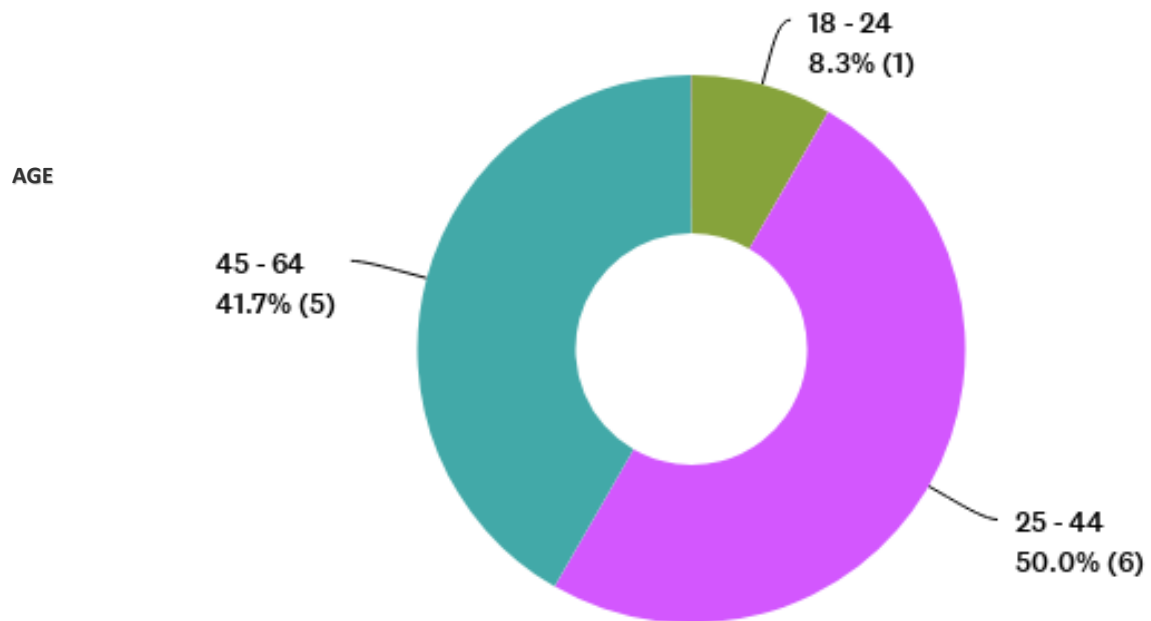
So, I went to A&E. After a 2 hour wait to see a triage nurse, they admitted me. I was X-rayed, the infection drained, and then put on IV antibiotics overnight and the following day and put on the emergency surgery list. Fortunately, I didn't need to go for emergency surgery, but they had to put me through 4 courses of antibiotics with a potential second night for observation.

The doctors allowed me to leave providing the dentist agreed to treat the tooth within seven days. I managed to book an appointment. I received a text saying this appointment is cancelled and again all I got when I called is a voicemail. So frustrating!!

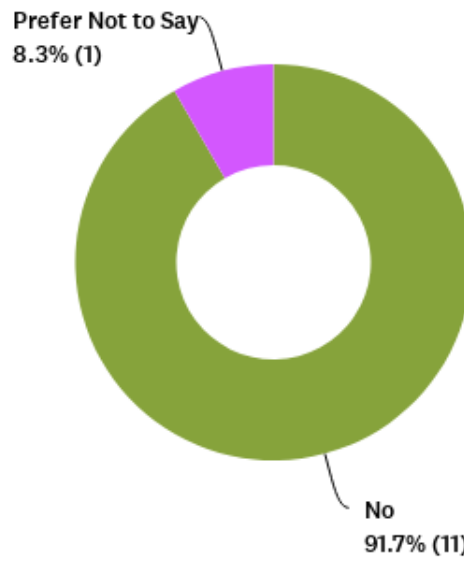
I wanted to highlight this as there seems to be a failure in the local emergency provision which is having undue impact on people's health, but also a massive burden on the already stretched A&E and hospital services. If the emergency dentist had treated me when they should have, the events that followed would never have happened and I wouldn't have had to suffer in the way that I did."



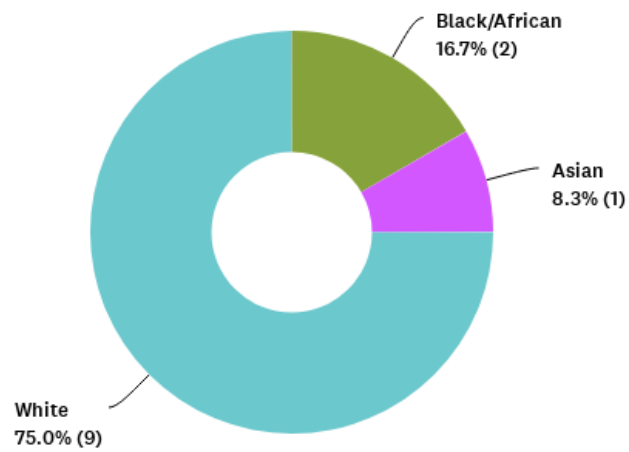
6.8. Demography



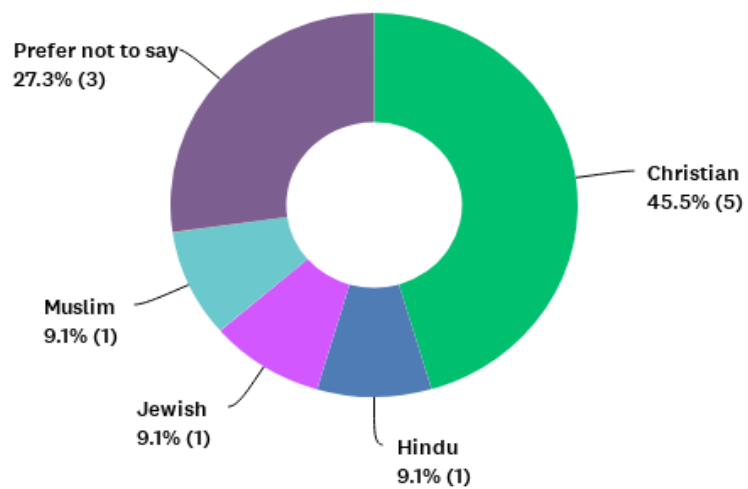
DISABILITY



ETHNICITY



FAITH / RELIGION



7. Key Findings from mystery calls

During November 2020, Healthwatch Barking & Dagenham contacted 20 dental practices in the borough; posing as patients. The aim of the calls was to identify and evidence the real time experiences that local people have when contacting the dental practices.

It was also to ascertain if there are disparities between the national message and the local reality of how services are supporting patients - to find out the information they are telling patients about the availability of their service.

As a mystery shopper exercise, Healthwatch used individual circumstances to elicit questions for each call, focusing on the offer, the information that's available and how well the caller was dealt with as a patient, a relative calling for a child or as someone new to the area seeking a service.

From the 19 dental practices Healthwatch contacted, 14 (73%) offer NHS services only; 3 (16%) offer both NHS and Private services and 2 (11%) offer Private services only. There was one service that no longer offers Dentistry. From the information Healthwatch gathered from the practices, 17 (89%) provide NHS services.

In Dagenham there are 11 practices and in Barking there are 8. Of the 5 services that offer private treatment, 3 are in Barking and 2 are in Dagenham.

All but one practice offering NHS services, was either not registering new patients, citing the coronavirus pandemic; not offering any appointments until weeks and months ahead because they were fully booked; referring patients back to NHS 111 to book emergency appointments only or telling people to try another Dentist. This seems to be happening exclusively with NHS dental services. When looking at the [NHS England Website](#) it clearly states that dental patients do not need to register with a dental practice.

Private practices however, offer same day or next day appointments and it seems, are not affected by the same challenges and restrictions posed by coronavirus that NHS services are.

It emerged from one practice offering both NHS and Private services – the 3rd practice contacted - declined to take anymore NHS patients; but offered to give a same day appointment when told the patient was so desperate, they was willing to pay for a private service.

Where all but one of the NHS services is telling people to contact another practice, they are effectively directing people into other local practices that will be telling them to do the same thing. This pushes people into a frustrating and dead end cycle that provides no hope of getting a service unless their treatment needs are deemed as an emergency or they opt to pay privately which is not possible for the majority of people.

Practices are using a voice message as the first point of contact and information for patients. One, citing **“Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the practice is restricted in the dental service we can provide and the amount of patients we can provide face to face treatment for. Patients will be assessed over the phone and urgent patients will be treated as priority. Outside of practice working hours, patients should call NHS 111.”** Calling 111 is for an emergency only. Faced with this, it’s hardly surprising that people trying to get a NHS appointment at a local practice, perceive that a service is not working well for them.

With the first COVID lock down from March 2020, dental practices ceased services for routine appointments; instead, people were advised to contact NHS 111 for emergency treatment only. As the second set of restrictions were implemented, the clear message from the NHS was that dental services would be open to provide appointments.

These are the responses from the practices:

1. Orchard Road (DS) Ltd (Dagenham – NHS)

If I want to register, I have to visit the dental practice and fill in a form. I asked when the next available appointment is and was told “not until January 2021”. I explained that I had severe pain and asked if I could be seen sooner. The answer was the same, “January.” I called again and this time a different receptionist picked up the phone. She said “All emergency appointments are released on Monday 8.30 am.”

2. Rush Green Dental Surgery (Dagenham – Private)

The mystery caller found out this was a private Dental Surgery. “I was told they do not work for the NHS, I can be seen the same day after booking an appointment. Prices depend on the treatment – just to be seen is £50, X-rays – £10 each, Fillings - £80 pounds.”

3. Dagenham Aspire Dental Care – (Dagenham – NHS & Private)

Due to the current virus, the practice is not registering new patients. They are fully booked with their own patients and are not taking new patients at the moment, especially for check-ups. I said, “I have a swelling and I need to be seen by a dentist urgently.” The answer was “We cannot guarantee an appointment. In case there is a cancellation we will call you but better not to wait and call 111.” Then I asked if it was possible to be seen privately because I was so desperate and ready to pay for the service. The receptionist muttered “These appointments are fully booked as well.” To my surprise I was called back maybe 30 or 45 minutes later. They asked me whether I called 111. They told me they were ready to see me at 1 pm but I had to bring an interpreter because they could not provide one for Bulgarians and Romanians. Their closing hours on Saturday was 1 pm. This was for a private treatment.

4. David's Dental Care (Dagenham – NHS)

I rang the practice and went straight through to a voice message. The following message was left “Due to the corona virus pandemic, the practice is restricted in the dental service we can provide and the amount of patients we can provide face to face treatment for. Patients will be assessed over the phone and urgent patients will be treated as priority. Outside of practice working hours, patients should call NHS 111.” Calling 111 is for an emergency only. After the message you have to leave your name, phone number and description of the problem and you will be contacted in a few hours or the next day within the working hours. Nothing was mentioned about new patients.

5. Abbey Dental Barking (Barking – NHS)

This practice said they are fully booked at the moment, and said they are not registering new patients. They advised me to check what the situation would be in 5 weeks and that I would have to call 111 if the problem is an emergency.

6. NHS The Child & Family Centre (Barking – Service information search outdated)

Five years ago it was a Dental Practice. At the moment it offers GP services.

7. Dental & Medical Clinic (Klinika) (Barking – Private)

This is a private clinic. You can book an appointment on the same day to see a dentist.

8. East Street Dental Practice (Barking – NHS)

This practice said they are not taking new patients because they are fully booked and said I should try to call them again at the beginning of December. I was told it is not because of the coronavirus pandemic but instead “Let's see if there will be any changes in December. You can try another dental practice or call 111.”

9. Essex Family Dental (Dagenham – NHS)

I left a message that my daughter needed to be treated because she had a toothache. I got no reply so rang again and it was answered this time. I was told I should go to the surgery, collect a registration form, fill it in at home for my daughter and return it back to the surgery to make an appointment. It was emphasised that the earliest available appointments were in 2 or 3 weeks and if a cancellation came up, she might be seen earlier, otherwise if it was an emergency, I should contact NHS 111.

10. Dagenham Dental (Dagenham – NHS)

There was no answer to my call, I went through to a voice message which gave their opening times and it advised patients to call 111 in case of an emergency or to leave a message. I left a message and received a response, they said “At the moment due to the coronavirus pandemic, we are not registering any new patients and will only see existing patients.” I was advised to call back in mid-January and was told “We might be able to squeeze you in between other emergencies if you become an emergency case.” I was told that “every dental practice would only take emergencies due to COVID 19.”

11. Levitan Dental Surgery (Dagenham – NHS)

They said they could register me, but said that the earliest appointment would be in January. “Due to the coronavirus pandemic, we are fully booked and are running late because we cannot see as many patients as we usually would. In an emergency you will need to call 111.”

12. Smile Dental Surgery (Barking – NHS & Private)

I was advised “I am afraid we are not registering new NHS patients. We are full up at the moment. We are not taking any new private patients either. We are already booking for February and March 2021. In an emergency you should call 111.”

13. The Heathway Dental Surgery (Dagenham – NHS)

I had no problem getting an appointment here, the receptionist said “The next available appointment is on 11th of December, would you like this one?”

14. Thames View Dental Surgery (Barking – NHS)

When I contacted them, they said “We are unable to book any routine face to face appointments and are only treating patients with emergencies.” Outside of their opening hours, patients are told to call 111, but only in an emergency.

15. The Barking Dental Practice (Barking – NHS)

When contacting this practice I was told, “We do not register new patients at the moment, because we are too busy and we do not know when we can take anymore new patients yet.”

16. Essex Family Dental (Dagenham – NHS)

I got a response straight away to my call, I was told “You can register with us immediately by coming into our practice and filling in the forms we need from you, but you should be aware that we have no appointments available until the New Year because of COVID 19. In an emergency, you will need to call 111 or try another dental practice.”

17. Ilford Lane Family Dental Surgery (Barking – NHS)

There was only a voice message for this practice that said “Leave your name and phone number and we will get back to you as soon as possible. In an emergency, you should call 111.”

18. Five Elms Dental Clinic (Dagenham – NHS Specialist Practice)

This practice specialises in providing a dental service for disabled people. Patients do not register for this service; they accept people who contact them or who are directly referred to them.

19. My Dentist (Barking – NHS & Private)

Although the voice message for this practice said “We remain open during the coronavirus pandemic.” When I spoke with the receptionist she told me they were not booking any NHS appointments. If I wanted to be registered, I was advised to call back in January because “At the moment we are taking private patients only.” I asked again, why they weren’t booking any NHS appointments. The answer was the same “At the moment we are not taking NHS appointments.”

20. Inspire Dental Dagenham (Dagenham – NHS)

The first response I got was from the voice message which said “We are experiencing a high volume of calls. Please hold and we will answer as soon as possible.”

After a wait, I eventually got through to someone who told me “We aren’t taking any new patients at that moment because we already have too many. You could call 111 or try another dental surgery.”

8. Recommendations

The experiences conveyed by people and the responses Healthwatch received from local dental practices serving the population of Barking and Dagenham has raised issues that should be addressed.

8.1. Access to Dental Services

Although the sample size for this project was small, the majority of the residents highlighted poor experiences when trying to register and get appointments. The mystery shopping exercise found that when people tried to get a service as a new patient they were:

- told by dental practices that they were not taking on new patients citing the coronavirus pandemic;
- referred to NHS 111 for emergency appointments
- were directed to other NHS practices in the local area that would give them the same messages

From the contact with local dental practices, Healthwatch Barking & Dagenham found out that NHS dental services account for 89% of those in the borough – see item 7.1 - it is essential that it is fit for purpose to meet the public health needs of the local community. Our findings show that people are struggling to register with local dental practices and there is not clear communication as to where they should go if they are unable to register at a practice? A confusing, mixed message causes frustration for people at a time when they are already feeling vulnerable to a debilitating health concern. It is clear that the current local offer is not meeting the dental care services that people need.

Taking the findings into account we recommended that:

- NHS England share their plans on how they will be ensuring that Barking & Dagenham residents are able to access local dental services; be seen in a timely manner; provide more resources to reduce the backlog of patients causing waiting times to become longer and to turn around what has now become an increasing problem for the local NHS.

8.2. Patient registration

The [NHS Website - Dentistry](#) clarifies that there is no requirement for people to register with a dentist, as there is with a GP service. However, local dentists are saying they are not ‘registering’ new patients and people have been told they have become a ‘de-registered’ patient – see 6.1. This is in contrast with NHS information and the message to the public. Although this may be driven by dentists finding practical ways to manage patient lists, it is actively misinforming and penalising people. This issue can be incredibly frustrating for patients. Local dental practices need to be better supported to help those most in need and address the inequalities this creates in the service.

NHS commissioned Dentists cannot refuse to provide a service to patients, unless legislative change permits practices to do so, as with the COVID pandemic lockdown. Practices providing Private and NHS services should not prioritise private patients over those receiving NHS services.

It is recommended that:

- NHS England addresses the confusion caused by the issue of “registration” and why dental practices in Barking and Dagenham are telling patients they must register with a practice when the NHS states they don’t?
- NHS England should remind practices in Barking and Dagenham of their responsibilities to NHS patients in relation to private patients, to ensure equity in the service is maintained.

8.3. Clearer information and signposting

There needs to be clear, accurate information about what to do if people cannot get an appointment with a dental practice. It creates an unnecessary problem for people if they cannot access information about the services available to them. It is imperative, especially at this current time, that people seeking information about local dental services can access the accurate information they need.

It is recommended:

- Local Dentists should be giving clear signposting advice about the urgent care that is available; where they cannot offer an urgent appointment to patients on their lists and those calling on the assumption that they have to register.
- Having looked at the [Barking and Dagenham CCG - Dental Information](#) – see 6.2 - it is outdated and currently offers inaccurate information that was last updated in January 2017. Action should be taken by the CCG to remedy this quickly and provide information that is current and accurate. The section should be updated to ensure the public are kept informed about local dental services.