

Mystery Shopping of Dental Practices in East Sussex



March 2022

1 What we did...

In December 2021, Healthwatch staff and volunteers undertook a 'Mystery Shopping' exercise with 74 dental practices based in East Sussex.

We wanted to find out how easy it was for people to find a dentist accepting NHS patients, and what information or guidance was being provided by those practices that were not accepting new NHS patients. For example, where were they being signposted to, were they being added to waiting lists or were they being offered private alternatives instead?



This activity was stimulated by the number of enquiries related to dentistry received by Healthwatch East Sussex during 2021, particularly from patients struggling to access NHS dental treatment. Dentistry was the most common theme in our enquiries and feedback in the autumn of 2021.

1.1 Our Aim:

Our aim was to review three key things:

1. Were Dental Practices in East Sussex accepting NHS patients at the time of the review?

If not, were people being added to waiting lists and/or what information was being provided to them about where to seek dental services?

2. How many requests were practices receiving from people seeking to join as NHS patients each week?
3. Were the people enquiring about NHS dentistry being offered private services as an alternative?

1.2 Our approach

Reviewers phoned dental practices during normal working hours (9am to 5pm), explained they were undertaking a survey on behalf of Healthwatch and asked staff a standard set of questions, so that we could compare responses on a like-for-like basis.

The process was tested and piloted before roll-out, and participants did not review their own practice. We couldn't make contact with all of the practices in East Sussex. Where calls were not answered, at least one follow-up call was made.

Responses were recorded in hard copy, and then uploaded to an online survey system.

This report provides a summary of the key themes identified in the responses to our questions. These reflect the information provided to us verbally by staff at the time of our calls. We acknowledge that services change and may have altered since calls were made.

2 What we found

2.1 Were Dental Practices in East Sussex accepting NHS patients at the time of the review?

Of the 74 East Sussex dental practices contacted, nearly two-thirds (47 - 63.5%) were not accepting or offering treatment to new NHS patients at the time of contact.

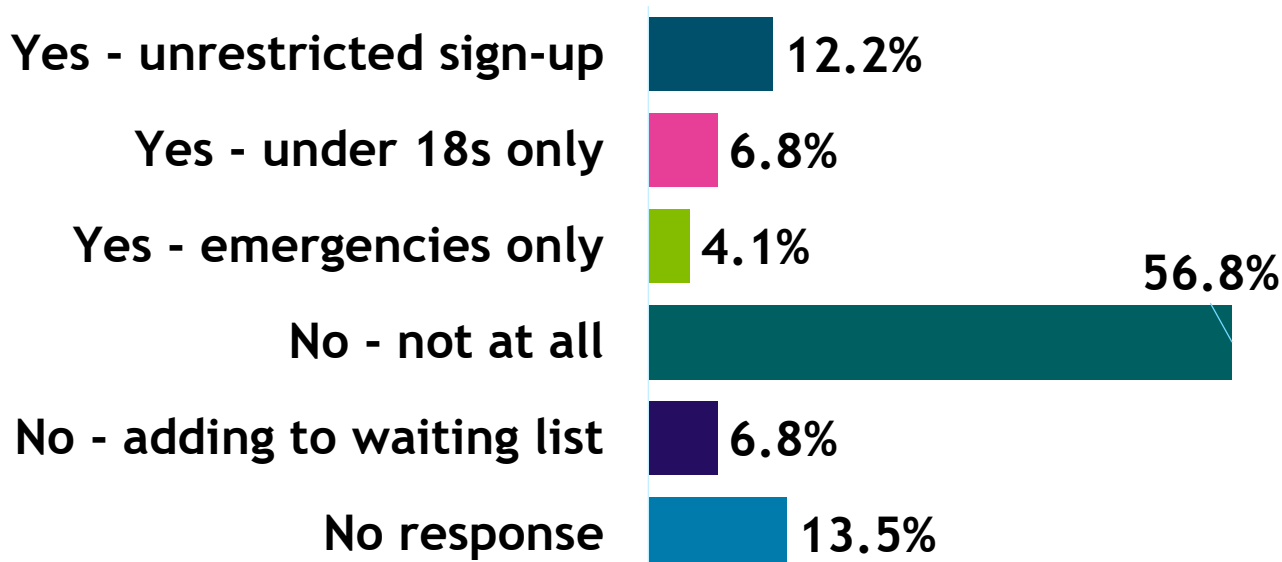
A total of 17 dental practices (23.0%) were accepting or treating new NHS patients. However, approximately half had restrictions, with five only accepting patients aged 18 or younger, and a further three were dealing with emergencies only.

This means that only seven (9.5%) of the 74 dental practices in East Sussex are currently accepting NHS patients on an unrestricted basis.

It is important to note that several of the practices accepting NHS patients (both restricted and unrestricted) identified significant wait times for appointments, often up to several months.

It was not possible to determine the status of some surgeries (10 - 13.5%) as attempts to contact them were unsuccessful, or staff were not able to respond.

Is the practice currently accepting/treating new NHS patients?



If not, were people being added to waiting lists and/or what information was being provided to them about where to seek dental services?

Of the 47 practices not accepting new NHS patients, the vast majority (42) were not offering any opportunity to be treated, whilst 5 were allowing people to join a waiting list.

- Those with waiting lists generally indicated that these were already long, with one extending to 8 pages.
- Waiting lists were not maintained by some, as they felt they were at capacity and this was unlikely to change. They received so many enquiries it was challenging to maintain, or it was unfair as it may provide ‘false hope’ patients.
- One practice had themselves tried to find other dentists with NHS availability and so signpost enquirers to them, but had been unable to find any in the local area.
- Several practices said that their capacity was limited due to a shortage of dentists.
- Some practices previously accepting NHS patients were now completely private, indicating they had given up their NHS contracts.

In terms of the signposting provided to people seeking NHS treatment but where they were unable to be seen, the information varied considerably from practice to practice:

- Eight practices referred people to NHS England or the Dental Helpline number.
- Four practices provided contact details for other dental surgeries in the area.
- Four practices provided details for the Emergency Dental Service (where applicable), with some acknowledging they were aware of the delays for this service.
- Two practices referred people to NHS111.
- One practice advised calling back in 12 months’ time.

Signposting often appears to be provided by practices without a direct knowledge of whether NHS services are available elsewhere. For example, the NHS ‘Find-a-dentist’ website doesn’t indicate whether NHS patients are currently being accepted, and the alternative practices being suggested were often not accepting NHS patients either.

This can lead to people being caught in a cycle, with the only way of accessing treatment being to contact practices directly themselves and identify the status of the services they offer.

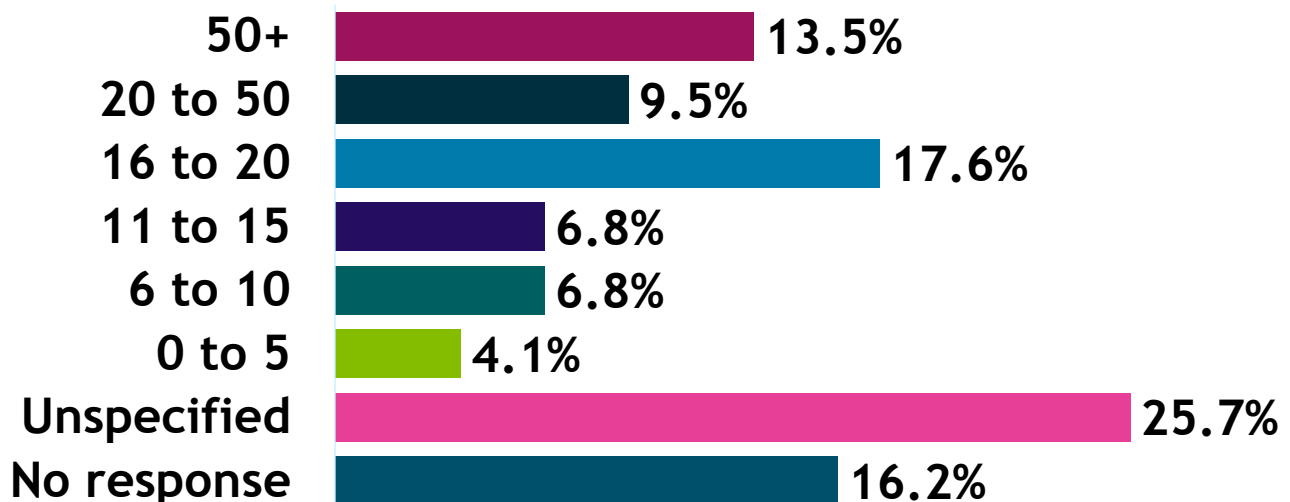
Frequent and repeated calls from patients trying to access appointments can lead to severe pressure on the staff dealing with these calls. This can lead to an increasing cycle of tension, with staff feeling overwhelmed, and patients not only unable to access treatment, but expressing their frustration, at times, inappropriately.

2.2 How many requests were practices receiving from people seeking to join as NHS patients each week?

Most of the dental practices contacted indicated that they were very busy, and in many cases had multiple enquiries each day from people seeking to obtain NHS dental treatment who had not previously used the practice.

Whilst figures may fluctuate over time, nearly a quarter of practices contacted (23.0%) indicated that they received 20 or more enquiries in a typical week. Three practices identified receiving 100 or more such requests on a weekly basis.

Approximately how many requests are you receiving from people seeking to join as NHS patients each week?



In part, the high numbers of enquiries being received may be linked to the theme identified in the previous section, where the only way for people to find out which practices are accepting NHS patients is to contact them directly. Central NHS England information often does not clarify this, and dental surgery websites may often be out-of-date. Both of these themes featured in our previous dental Mystery Shopping exercise and are featured in our [COVID-19 Lockdown: Information and Access to Dental Care](#) report.

These numbers may represent an increased number of people seeking access to NHS dentistry, but may also reflect individuals contacting, or registering at, multiple surgeries in pursuit of access to dental care.

Some practices were unable to quantify the number of enquiries they received, especially where these were not logged or people were not added to a waiting list, such as practices which offered exclusively private treatment.

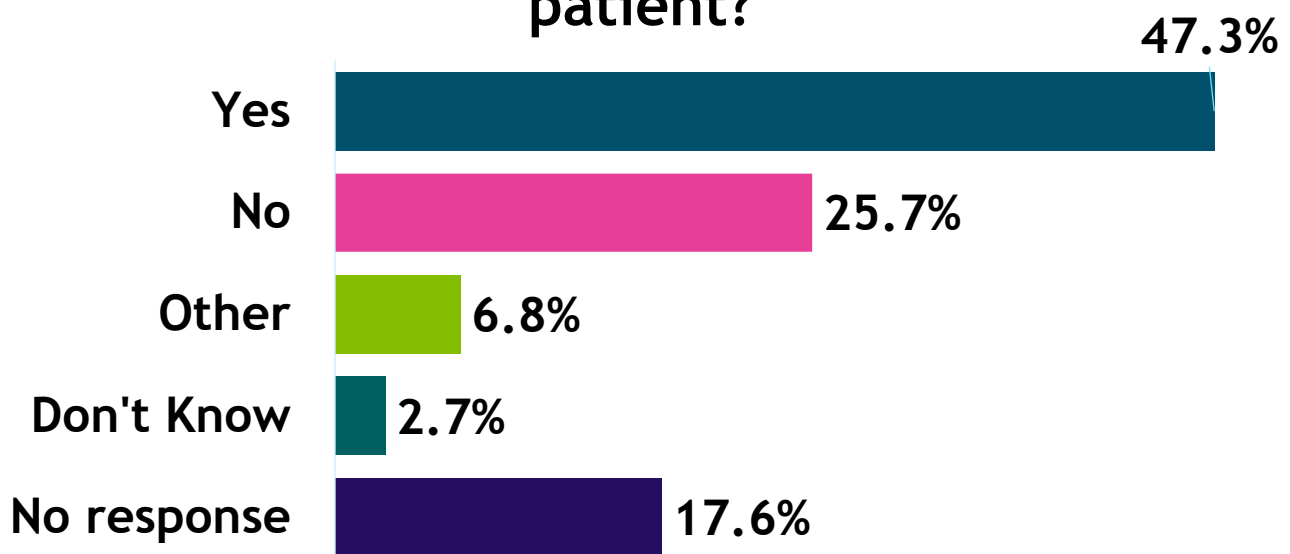
2.3 Were people who enquired about NHS dentistry being offered private services as an alternative?

Nearly half of the dental practices in East Sussex (35 - 47.3%) made clear that if they were contacted by someone seeking NHS treatment, that they would offer them private treatment as an alternative (where available).

This figure includes 10 of the 17 practices that were currently accepting or treating NHS patients.

Whilst it may be beneficial for patients that private treatment is being offered at a time when NHS alternatives may not be available, particularly where they are in need of urgent or emergency treatment, there may be a risk of people being unduly guided towards private and paid for services.

Do you offer the opportunity to receive private dentistry services to anyone seeking to join as a new NHS patient?



Clear discrepancies were identified between the availability of NHS and private appointments at the same practice. One practice accepting NHS patients at the current time indicated that although NHS appointments were booked-up right through to May/June 2022 (and therefore not available now), they were able to offer private appointments in approximately two weeks. Another highlighted NHS appointments in April, with private appointments available in February.

3 Conclusions

3.1 Practices accepting NHS Patients

With only one-in-ten dental practices in East Sussex currently accepting NHS patients, the opportunities for anyone seeking to join a patient list or receive treatment is very limited. This is made more challenging by the significant wait times for NHS appointments.

It is positive that some practices are prioritising NHS treatment for under-18s and in emergencies, however, this only provides a solution for part of the population. This may not be conducive to the provision of accessible, pro-active and preventative oral health.

Overall dental service capacity does not appear to be able to meet demand. All dental practices reported being very busy, irrespective of whether they were offering NHS or private services. Some practices had also closed their private patient lists in response to demand. Many had appointments booked well into the future, often several months, which may mean long wait times for everyone seeking dental care.

Some practices reported not having enough dentists, or struggling to recruit, which limited their capacity and ability to provide services.

Recommendation(s):

- Healthwatch East Sussex should make NHS England, Healthwatch England and local health and care commissioners aware of the limited capacity to provide NHS treatment in East Sussex at the current time.
- Healthwatch East Sussex should make the Local Dental Committee aware of the findings from this exercise.

3.2 Signposting and information

Nearly all practices reported regular enquiries from people who were not current patients seeking access to appointments, with some receiving significant numbers weekly (100+).

The information and signposting provided by dental practices in East Sussex to patients seeking NHS treatment, either routine or emergency, appears to be inconsistent and differs from practice-to-practice. This can force people to 'ring round' all dental practitioners in pursuit of NHS appointments.

This may also reflect the wider issues of a lack of overall dental capacity (both private and NHS) and absence of a clear central support pathway. Ultimately, it may leave people with nowhere to go, or forced to accept alternatives such as paying for private treatment.

Recommendation(s):

- NHS England should ensure that the NHS-operated 'Find a Dentist' website and other central sources of information on NHS dental services is accurate, up-to-date and accessible.

- NHS England should require all NHS dental contract holders to make it explicitly clear whether they are or are not accepting NHS patients through their websites, and to keep these messages up to date.
- Healthwatch East Sussex should contact all East Sussex dental practices and encourage them to make public or provide the same core information on support: as a minimum this should include details of the Emergency Dental Service (EDS) and Dental Helpline.

3.3 NHS versus Private Treatment

Approximately half of dental practices were making people enquiring about NHS treatment aware of the private services they offered.

Examples did indicate that on occasion this was offered to allow treatment which may not have otherwise been available or possible, either due to wait times or the types of treatment required being outside the NHS provision.

However, it is noticeable that wait times for NHS appointments were often far longer than for private patients, often months compared to weeks, even when services were being delivered at the same surgery.

Recommendation(s):

- NHS England should ensure that delivery of NHS dental contracts is appropriately monitored to ensure that services are delivered in a form that maximises access to services.
- Healthwatch East Sussex should continue to promote the Healthwatch in Sussex guide to NHS Dentistry, so people are fully aware of the dental services available via the NHS, charges and costs, eligibility for free services and information on how to access support.



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