



NHS Dentistry – a Service in Decay? July 2021



Acknowledgments

Thank you to our research volunteers - Trish, Hazel, Gareth, Emma and to the dental practice staff for taking the time to answer our questions during their very busy days.

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Background

In 2018 Healthwatch York published 'Filled to Capacity: NHS Dentistry in York - a Report Based on Local People's Experience', which found that it was difficult to access NHS dentistry in the city. At that time 46% of people that responded to our survey reported that they couldn't find an NHS dentist that was taking patients and 45% of people who had been looking for an NHS dentist said they had been trying for over 2 years.

<https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Healthwatch-York-Access-to-NHS-Dentistry-Report-2018.pdf>

Healthwatch England continues to hear concerns about dentistry which were highlighted at the end of 2020 in the 'Dentistry and the Impact of COVID-19 Report'.

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/2020-12-09/dentistry-and-impact-covid-19>

The report shows a 452% rise in calls and complaints over the summer (July to September 2020). In a follow-up review, Healthwatch England looked at 1,129 people's experiences of accessing dental care received between October and December 2020 and found that access to dentistry was difficult for more than 7 in 10 people (72%), with some people actively seeking dental treatment being told they would have to wait anywhere between a few months to, in one case, two years for an appointment.

Healthwatch England's research continues to show many people continue to struggle to access NHS dental treatment. Feedback on NHS dental care between January and March 2021 found that 80% of people found it difficult to access timely care.

"People have felt pressured to go private, as dentists have said they couldn't provide NHS treatment but could if people were willing to pay private fees. This was especially difficult for those on low incomes, those who lost their jobs during the pandemic, and people who faced having to afford private care for their whole family."

- **Dentistry Insight Briefing Report 24 May 2021**

Healthwatch England previously called for more emphasis to be placed on solving structural issues within NHS dental services and warned dental care is facing an immediate crisis;

“Our findings show that access to dental care is currently neither equal nor inclusive, leading to traumatic experiences for many people. This provides yet more evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the human impact of years of structural issues in NHS dentistry and is now pushing it to crisis point. We are hugely concerned that this will have detrimental effects to the nation’s health for years to come. Although we have to grapple with the pandemic, all efforts should be made to treat those in need of urgent care and provide more accurate and up-to-date information to help people find and access NHS dental care. In the longer term, the Department of Health and Social Care must prioritise the importance of oral health and commit to improving access to dentistry for everyone who needs it.”

- **Sir Robert Francis QC, Chair of Healthwatch England**

In line with the national data, Healthwatch York has seen an increase in enquiries from people struggling to access NHS dental care and we decided that we needed accurate, up-to-date local information on dental provision across the city.

Yorkshire and Humberside Region

Following a recent enquiry from a man willing to travel to access dentistry, we asked the 14 other local Healthwatch across Yorkshire and Humber if they are aware of any dentists in their patch taking on NHS patients. 13 responded that they did not know of any dentist taking on patients, and were experiencing similar problems themselves. 1 responded confirming they knew of one on their patch that could provide details of a dentist who was seeing people for dental issues requiring more than a routine appointment. So to the best of our knowledge at this time there are no dentists accepting NHS patients across Yorkshire and Humber for routine care.

The Current Picture in York

Healthwatch York has received an increase in the number of complaints and queries about dentistry across the city. Some randomised patient experiences from our 'issues log' 2020/21 follow;

"Caller feeling desperate having phoned all the dentists she could find listed for York, and every single one that answered told her they are not taking new NHS patients. One practice told her she would not be able to get seen by an NHS dentist anywhere in York for 5 years."

"Person called having just received a letter from their dental practice to say it's going fully private & they have been de-registered. Has been phoning all the dentists in York and cannot find anywhere taking on new NHS patients. Has four children. Concerned about how to get them into the habit of getting their teeth checked regularly when they no longer have a dentist, and cannot find one."

"Caller has received a letter saying they have been de-registered by their York dental practice. Is in their 80's and has severe mobility problems. Has been ringing round dentists today but cannot find one taking on new NHS patients."

"At the beginning of this month, we were informed that our dentist was ceasing NHS treatment from 1st June 2021. We went online and could only find one dentist in York which is taking NHS patients and so have registered with them using their online form. But we have just been put on a waiting list and don't know when we might be accepted. There doesn't seem to be any central system to help people to find a new NHS dentist now, as there was before."

"I've been unable to find any dentist within 20 miles that are currently accepting new NHS patients (foregoing those that offer a 2 year+ waiting list). What would you recommend I do, as my dental health is in poor shape?"

"My daughter is 10 years old and we cannot find a dentist that takes new NHS patients in York. I have searched everywhere and called about 20 different clinics."

“We are astounded to find that we no longer have an NHS dentist, indeed apparently we were never with an NHS dentist, of which is quite different to what we were led to believe, and we are certainly not the only ones.”

“We now are unable to find a NHS dentist, we have been told all lists are closed, the lists open (only 2 dental practices) have a very long waiting list, if you want to see a dentist through the NHS you will not see one for 3 years if you are able to be on a list. We cannot even get on a list, we have been told we have to go private, we have lost trust in the dental NHS system, and urgent reform is required.”



Our Findings

We contacted 39 dental practices (Appendix 1) across the city (all the practices listed by us on our website) and conducted a semi-structured interview (Appendix 2) by telephone in May and June 2021.

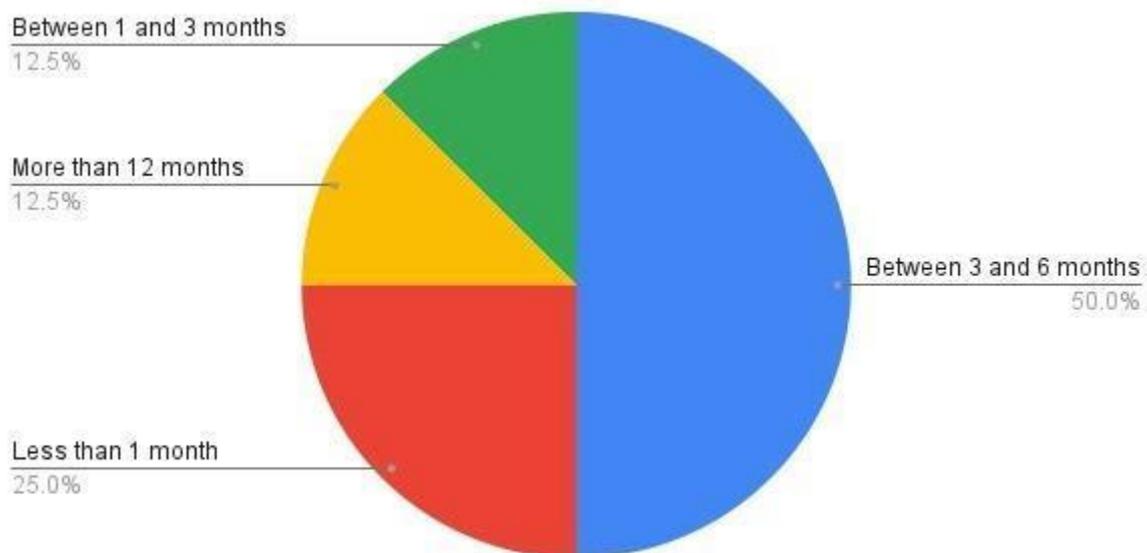
Is the Practice currently accepting new NHS patients?

We found that no practice in York was currently accepting new NHS adult patients. One practice was able to offer NHS treatment to the children of patients enrolled on their private care plan.

One practice reported that they were the only orthodontic NHS practice in York for children and that they currently had a two year waiting list for treatment.

What is the current approximate waiting time for existing NHS patients to have routine dental treatment?

Of 39 practices in York, 8 reported that they were currently treating existing NHS patients for routine dental treatment. Waiting times varied from 'less than one month' to 'more than 12 months', with most practices (50%) having a waiting time of between 3 and 6 months.



What has been the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of the Practice to provide NHS funded services?

Each of the 8 NHS treatment practices in York has been seriously impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, for some practices the impact has been acute and they were still struggling at the time of our survey:

“...there is no NHS treatment available at the moment due to back-log of patients.”

“...the effect of Covid and dentists leave and retire. So there is a big backlog.”

“We have a very large back-log to catch up on...”

“We have reduced capacity to see patients...”

“No new patients being taken on and no routine appointments...”

“Massive disruption continues and delta variant brings further uncertainty and delay. It will be September before NHS routine appointments start again.”

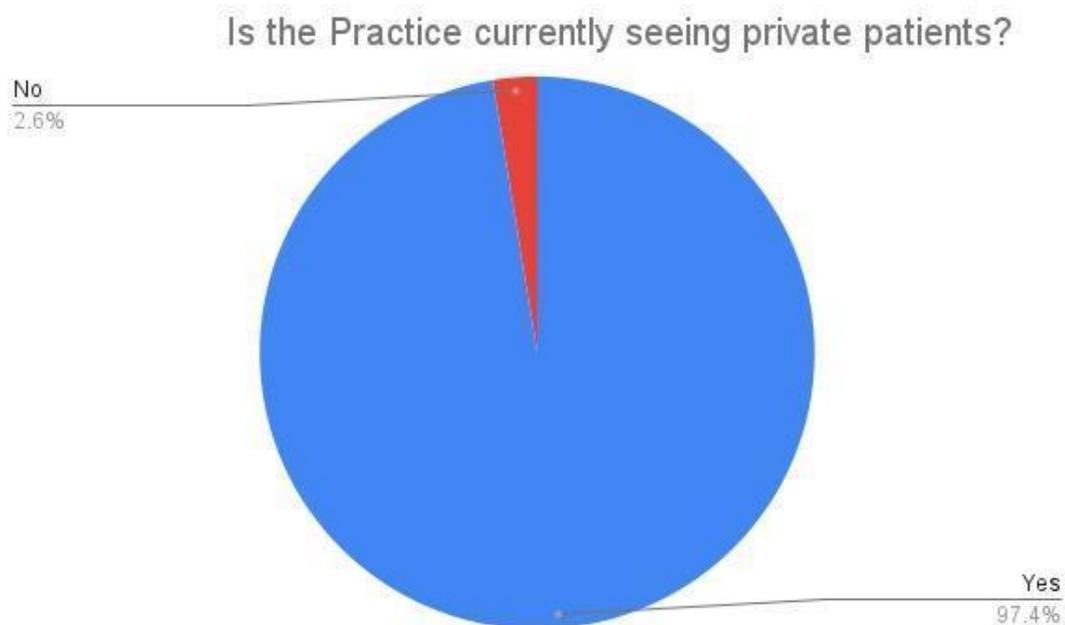
“We do hope to be offering NHS treatment in September due to the hiring of a new dentist.”

Is the Practice currently seeing private patients?

Only one practice of 39 reported that they were not currently seeing private patients and this was due to the increased demand for NHS services and the wish to prioritise NHS patients. This practice reported:

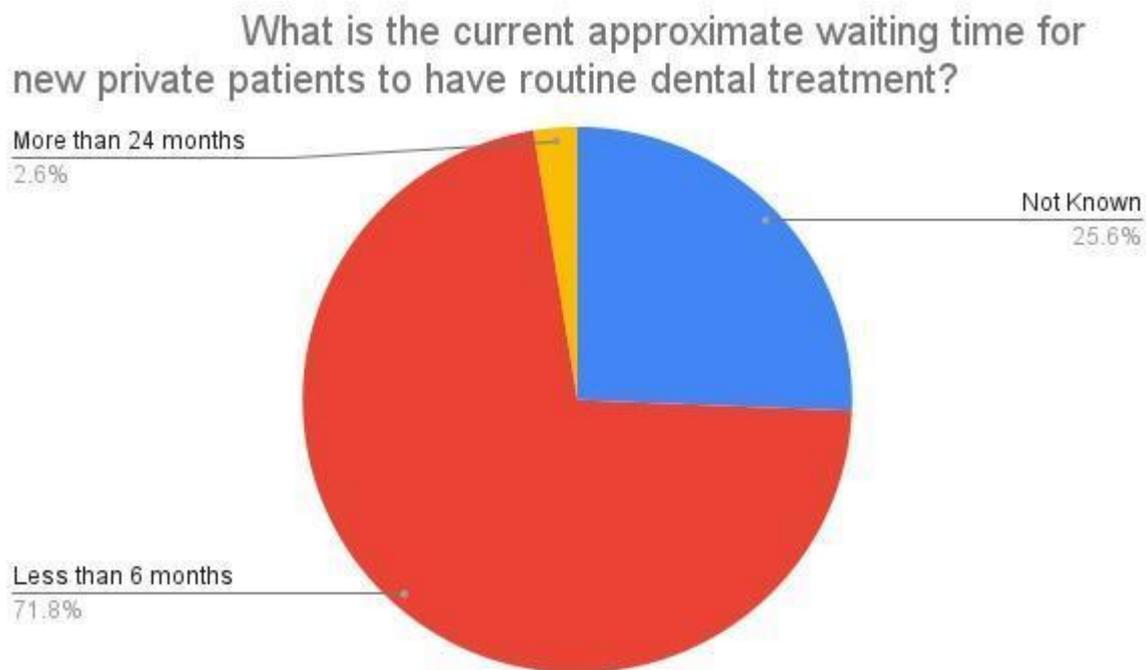
“The majority of our patients are NHS patients and have been prioritised. I have been a Dental Nurse for 35 years and I think the old payment system was better, UDA's have been a huge problem.”

- See Appendix 3 for an explanation of Units of Dental Activity (UDA)



What is the current approximate waiting time for new private patients to have routine dental treatment?

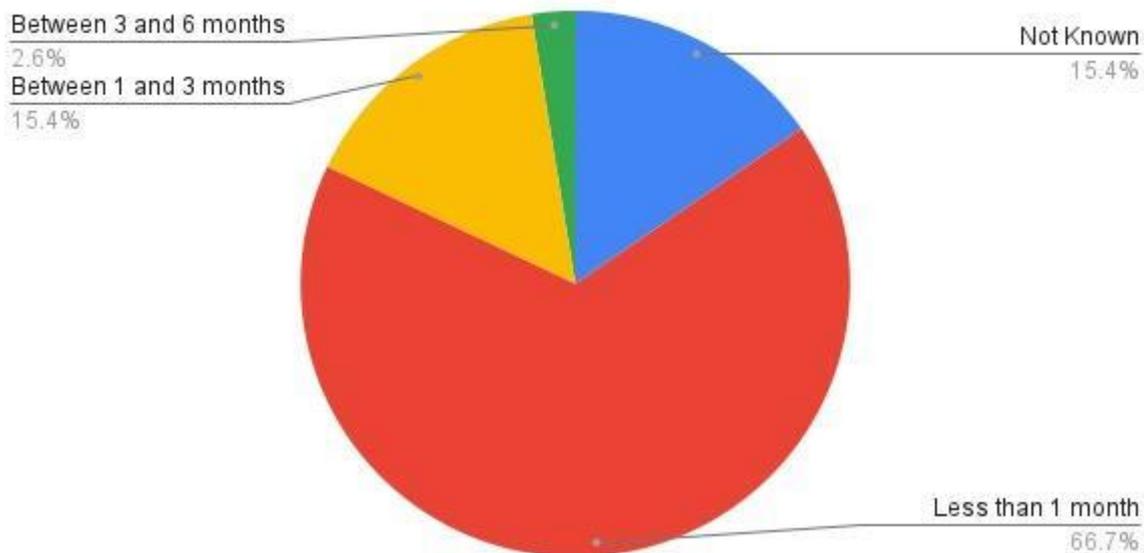
The majority (72%) of practices treating private patients reported that the waiting time for new patients was 'less than six months'. This ranged from a week, or a few weeks for some, through to 3 to 6 months for others.



What is the current approximate waiting time for existing private patients to have routine dental treatment?

The majority of practices treating private patients reported that the waiting time for existing patients was 'less than one month' (66%) with many reporting that patients could be seen in a couple of weeks. Treatment was often scheduled on a bi-annual basis and some flexibility for rebooking remains in the system.

What is the current approximate waiting time for existing private patients to have routine dental treatment?



What has been the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of the Practice to provide services for private patients?

Some private practices reported a low level of impact from Covid-19;

“Fully open 5 days per week now.”

“...hasn't impacted, been open since June <2020>.”

“Not really affecting us now, we're private and we got air purifiers, not quite back to normal, but not affecting our patients too much.”

“Just getting back to normal and catching up with everything, lots of new patients recently.”

“Working hard logistically, full and busy.”

“The NHS is not treating people, so we're taking a lot more people. Still taking new patients for fillings etc. since June <2020>...we're very busy.”

“We haven't changed throughout the pandemic, so no real change to what we do. Extending appointments is normal now, we have no backlog.”

“No effect, we're very busy and have been open all the way through.”

“Not too bad - managed to get on top of the first lock down, routine stuff is back to normal with triage. Social distancing and new criteria all affect the amount we can see in the day, we can't see non-registered patients, we're getting lots of unregistered people calling with toothache, but they can't help them.”

A few practices reported a greater impact;

“Longer appointment times and enhanced sterilisation in line with government regulations.”

“We can't see as many due to fallow time, full diaries at the moment.”

“We can't treat as many patients as before due to a loss of surgery time, less flexibility with fewer appointments.”

“It has cost more due to longer appointments; lower volumes and new equipment. Patients' experience hasn't changed other than government regulations on social distancing.”

“More time for every patient. Impact, more time for each patient, it varies according to the patient, but there is a reduction overall.”



What needs to happen...

We believe that action in four areas needs to be taken to address the issues that people have shared with Healthwatch.

- Rapid and radical reform of the way dentistry is commissioned and provided - recognising that the current arrangements do not meet the needs of many people who cannot access NHS dental care in a timely way and acknowledge issues faced by the dental profession.
- Reform commissioning to tackle the twin crises of access and affordability - ensuring that people are not excluded from NHS dental services because of lack of provision locally or difficulty in meeting charges. Currently, there are significant inequalities that must be removed. New arrangements should be based on maximising access to NHS dental services, with particular emphasis on reducing inequalities.
- Improve the clarity of the information about NHS dentistry - improving information, including online, so that people have a clear picture of where and how they can access services, and the charges they will need to pay.

- Use dental practices to support people's general health - harnessing opportunities, such as the development of Integrated Care Systems (ICS), to link oral health to other key issues such as weight management and smoking cessation.

Appendix 1.

Dental practices interviewed:

Acomb Dental and Implant Clinic

Acorn Dental Practice

Ainsty Dental & Implant Clinic

Aldwark Dental Practice

Alpha Dental Studio

Andrea Ubhi

Bishopthorpe Dental Centre

Blossom Dental Care and Implant Studio

Bupa Dental Care

Bupa Dental Care York

Castlegate Dental Centre

Clifton Dental Practice

Clifton Moor Dental Practice

Clock House Dental

Copmanthorpe Dental Centre

Crystal Clear Dental

Fresh Smiles Rawcliffe

Gilkeson Dental Surgery

Holbrook Dental

Hopkins & Poyner

Huntington Dental Surgery

James Pegg Dentistry

Lilac House Specialist Dental Practice

Manor House Dental Practice

Nunnery Lane Dental Practice
Orthodontic Excellence
Orthokind
Poppleton Dental Practice
PURE Dental York - Dunnington
PURE Dental York - Strensall
St Saviourgate Dental Practice
The Beeches Dental Practice
The Mount Dental Practice
Wigginton Dental Practice
Windmill Orthodontics
Woodthorpe Dental Centre
Wortley House Dental Practice
York Dental Practice
York Orthodontics

Appendix 2.

Dental Practice Research Questionnaire

1. Dental Practice Name

2. Address

3. Telephone Number

4. Email Address

5. Website

6. How can patients contact the Practice? (please tick all that apply)

Phone answered by a receptionist

Phone answered by a machine

By email

Via a contact form on a website

Other

7. Is the Practice currently accepting new NHS patients? (please tick all that apply - if 'No' go to Q.12)

Yes - adults

Yes - children

Yes - pregnant women

No

7. What is the approximate waiting time for new NHS patients to have routine dental treatment?

Less than 6 months

Between 6 and 12 months

Between 12 and 18 months

Between 18 months and 24 months

More than 24 months

Not known

8. If the Practice has a waiting list - can NHS patients on this list be seen for urgent dental treatment?

Yes

No

No waiting list

9. What is the current approximate waiting time for existing NHS patients to have routine dental treatment?

Less than 1 month

Between 1 and 3 months

Between 3 and 6 months

Between 6 and 12 months

More than 12 months

Not Known

10. Are some types of NHS treatment or appointments currently restricted?

11. What has been the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of the Practice to provide NHS funded services?

12. Is the Practice currently seeing private patients?

13. What is the current approximate waiting time for new private patients to have routine dental treatment?

Less than 6 months

Between 6 and 12 months

Between 12 and 18 months

Between 18 months and 24 months

More than 24 months

Not known

14. What is the current approximate waiting time for existing private patients to have routine dental treatment?

Less than 1 month

Between 1 and 3 months

Between 3 and 6 months

Between 6 and 12 months

More than 12 months

Not Known

15. What has been the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of the Practice to provide services for private patients?

16. Confirm the practice details on Healthwatch York information

<<https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/services/?filter=dentists>>

All checked and correct

Ooops, they need updating!

Appendix 3. What are Units of Dental Activity (UDA's)?

NHS England is responsible for funding NHS dental activity. It currently commissions high street NHS dentists to provide a set number of Units of Dental Activity (UDAs) each year. UDAs represent what needs to be done during a visit to the dentist. For example, an examination may be one UDA, a filling may be 3 UDAs, and dentures may be 12 UDAs. NHS England has 14 Local Offices that commission NHS dental activity. They decide how many UDAs they will commission for their area. The Yorkshire and Humber Local Office covers the York area. The value of a UDA is agreed locally and differing courses of treatment are 'worth' differing numbers of UDAs. These are linked to the three 'Bands' of patient charge for NHS dental treatment. For example, if a patient has an NHS filling they will pay £53.90 for a Band 2 treatment, which earns the dentist three UDAs. In the current contract there are no financial incentives for dentists to keep patients disease-free. Instead, all payment is for treating active disease.

(Extract from 'Filled to Capacity: NHS Dentistry in York March 2018 - A Report Based on Local People's Experience, Healthwatch York.)

Under the previous NHS contract dentists were paid for every item of treatment they provided: examination, filling, crown or denture. Under the new system they are paid per course of treatment, irrespective of how many items are provided within it.

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York CVS

Healthwatch York is a York CVS project. York CVS is a social action organisation; supporting and championing York's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector to make positive change, challenge issues and grow new ideas for the future in order to strengthen communities.

