

# Accessing dentistry services during COVID-19

July 2021

## Background

Access to NHS dental care continues to be a problem for people across England with Healthwatch England recording a 22% rise in calls and complaints about dentistry between January and March 2021. Healthwatch England's review of 1,375 people's experiences found a lack of consistency across the country when it comes to accessing a dental appointment. Whilst some people were asked to wait an unreasonable time of up to three years for an NHS appointment, those able to afford private care could get an appointment within a week ([Healthwatch England, 2021](#)).

We wanted to find out what the situation is in Sutton as we have seen an increase in the amount of enquiries from residents about how they can access local dentistry services. We hope that our findings will help us to signpost residents to dental surgeries who are accepting new NHS patients.

## How to find an NHS dentist

There is no need to register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP because you are not bound to a catchment area.

People need to find a dental surgery that is convenient for them, and phone them to see if there are any appointments available.

Dental surgeries will not always have the capacity to take on new NHS patients. You may have to join a waiting list, look for a different dentist who is taking on new NHS patients, or be seen privately.

Once you find a dental surgery, you may have to fill in a registration form at your first visit which is just to add you to their patient database. But that does not mean you have guaranteed access to an NHS dental appointment in the future ([NHS, 2019](#)).

## Dentistry during COVID-19

According to the [British Dental Association](#), routine dentistry during COVID-19 requires the correct social distancing measures and personal protective equipment to be put in place.

Many practices are still catching up from when they were closed during the first national lockdown and those delivering NHS care in particular may have a backlog.

Enhanced disinfection protocols, the time taken to put on and take off PPE, the time taken to clear the air after a water based dental treatment and social distancing means that, although practices are open their usual hours, they can accommodate fewer patients than before.

## What we did

We contacted all **36** dental practices in and around the London Borough of Sutton to identify the practices taking on new patients, and average waiting times for accessing routine and emergency appointments.

Healthwatch Sutton volunteers spoke to **30** dental practices between 16<sup>th</sup> June 2021 and 19<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

Our volunteers did contact the remaining **6** dental practices but they did not receive a response.

## What we found

### Question 1 - Are you currently taking on new patients?

**6** dental practices are **not** currently taking on new patients.

**24** dental practices are currently taking on new patients.

### Question 2 - Are you taking on new NHS or private patients, both?

Of the **24** dental practices who are taking on new patients, **12** are taking on **NHS patients**.

You can receive treatment as a **private patient** at **21** out of the **24** dental practices taking on new patients.

- Of the **12** dental practices taking on new NHS patients, **8** are also taking on private patients.
- Of the **24** dental practices taking on new patients, **13** are **only** taking on private patients.

### Question 3 - Do you have NHS patients?

**29** out of the **30** dental practices have NHS patients.

### Question 4 - Are you taking on NHS patients for emergencies?

Of the **24** dental practices who are taking on new patients, **12** are taking on NHS patients for **emergencies**.

### Question 5 - Are you taking on children as NHS patients?

Of the **24** dental practices who are taking on new patients, **23** are taking on **children as NHS patients**.

However, at **7** out of the **23** dental practices taking on children as NHS patients, children can only be registered if their parents and/or siblings are already registered with the practice.

### Question 6 - What is your waiting time for urgent care?

The waiting time for urgent care varies widely from 2 hours to 2 months.

Waiting time for urgent care	Number of dental practices offering waiting time
Same day	13
Less than 1 week	6
1 week	1
1-2 weeks	2
3-4 weeks	1
1 month	0
2 months	2
No time specified	4

- 1 dental practice advised us that they do not offer urgent care.
- 2 dental practices advised us that the waiting time for urgent care is dependent on COVID conditions.
- 1 dental practice advised us that if a person calls and is not registered with the practice they can be seen but will need to pay privately.
- 1 dental practice said that there is more availability for urgent care appointments if they are a private patient.

### Question 7 - What is your waiting time for routine checks?

The waiting time for routine care varies widely from 1 week to 6 months.

Waiting time for routine care	Number of dental practices offering waiting time
1-2 weeks	7
2-3 weeks	2
3-4 weeks	2
1-2 months	6
2-3 months	7
3 months or more	3
No time specified	2

- 1 dental practice did not answer this question.
- 1 dental practice advised us that the waiting time for urgent care is dependent on Covid conditions.
- 2 dental practices advised us that it is likely that private patients will be able to make an appointment for routine care sooner than NHS patients.
- 1 dental practice advised us that it depends on the professional's clinical judgement when someone is offered an appointment for routine care i.e. 2 months, 3 months, 6 months.
- 1 dental practice advised us that it depends on the dentist as some have longer waiting lists than others.
- 3 dental practices advised us that they will try to see a patient sooner if there is a cancellation.

### Any other comments?

Even though we are not currently taking on new patients, we can offer advice over the phone. We also sometimes get called out to see care home residents.

We take 4 to 5 phone calls a day from people looking for dental care. We want to accept new patients but we are a dentist down and the team are putting in extra hours and recruiting for a new dentist. The current situation and COVID guidance has created an extra 50% workload.

The Practice was taking on NHS patients until 4 weeks ago but as the other dentist has left, this is not possible currently. The NHS contract with the dentists is not providing sufficient funding for NHS patients and this has become worse since the Covid situation. Only a limited number of patients are able to be seen in order to adhere to the guidelines. The receptionist advises callers to try the NHS choices website and has checked this herself but there may be long waiting lists of 4-5 weeks for emergency treatment. If they call 111, the person is referred to a surgery but this is often only private care. They advised that if the patient is in pain, they should see any dentist and then try and find an NHS dentist.

More funding for NHS dental treatment is required from the Government (UDA points). The COVID pandemic has brought the problem to the fore. A waiting list for new NHS patients was started in May 2021 but the patients are being advised to also try other practices as they may be able to be seen sooner by a dentist. The dentists are trying their very best in the current situation to give care to their patients.

The practice receives many telephone calls from people searching for NHS dental care.

We try to make everyone happy and try to accept everyone coming for treatment. During the pandemic, we have been in touch with patients and we wear PPE.

### Next steps

We will use our findings to inform our signposting work and help local people get the support they need. We will also share our findings with our information and advice service provided by Citizens Advice Sutton (via Advice Link Partnership Sutton, ALPS) to inform their signposting.

We also would like to find out more about the experiences of residents accessing dental services and are looking into doing a more in-depth project.

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