

Croydon residents and dentists work together to highlight needs and communicate services better

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- Healthwatch Croydon surveyed residents on dental service and assessed dental practice websites, working closely with the Croydon Local Dental Committee.
- We found variability in access, with patients having difficulty accessing services when they were in pain and a lack of information and confusion on how services are delivered. However, there was significant satisfaction with NHS services once seen. There were also concerns about costs - even with NHS treatment.
- Our recommendations suggest focusing on service variability and undertaking a local needs assessment, allocation of appointments as well better communication about how dentistry is delivered to giving residents better insight into services.

During the COVID pandemic in 2020, Healthwatch Croydon heard from Croydon residents that they had difficulty accessing and using dental services. As a result, we devised a survey to understand views on how people were accessing services, their experience of services and perceptions of dental services. We also assessed GP practices' websites to see if they met patients needs and expectations. Throughout this time, we have worked closely with the Croydon Local Dental Committee (LDC), to understand how services are delivered and how our insight can improve services. This experience has been profiled in the Integrated Care Journal: <https://integratedcarejournal.com/newsdit-article/7f6d0005cfe999ea002f699c0088d21d/healthwatch-and-croydon-ldc-working-to-highlight-local-patient-needs/>

These are our findings based on the 156 responses from the survey:

- **There is variability in access:** 49% of respondents found it easy or very easy to access their NHS dentist to enquire about appointments, while 46% found it difficult or very difficult.

- **Most contacted because they had an urgent need or were in pain:** 49% found it difficult or very difficult to get a dental appointment when there was a problem. In emergency situations such as a broken tooth, 38% of respondents found it difficult or very difficult to get a dental appointment.
- **Most found information on websites not that useful:** Only 23% of respondents found information on their dentist's website useful or very useful; with 12% for the NHS website and 7% for other websites.
- **Most rely on the dentist they usually use even if they are not regular attendees:** Most respondents (78%) mostly tried to get help by contacting the dentist they usually use, 16% contacted another dentist, 5% contacted NHS 111 and obtained details for a local dentist, 5% were directed for urgent dental care (after contacting 111).
- **Once they get seen, most are happy with the service they get:** 33% found the dental treatment they received very good, and a further 19% said good compared with 10% who said bad or very bad - just 6% found it very bad.
- **NHS dentistry is much appreciated but there are cost concerns.:** 98% state that it is either important or very important to have regular access to an NHS dentist. Even for NHS services, two thirds are concerned about cost.

These are our recommendations which are relevant to providers and commissioners:

- **Access needs to be less variable:** The problems in the way NHS England commissions NHS dentistry and allocates appointments is causing variability in access to NHS dental services. Some Croydon residents can get an NHS check-up while others cannot access urgent NHS care, yet they live within miles of each other. This needs to be explained and addressed.
- **Undertake a local dental needs assessment:** The current allocation of NHS appointments is based on information that is 16 years out of date. Croydon has seen a population increase of 10% in the last decade causing significant demand challenges which need to be considered under such an assessment. This would help ensure dental unit supply meets current demand.

- **Understanding the perception of a regular dentist:** Many patients perceive that they have a regular dentist, because they have been going to the same dentist or surgery for many years – even if they do not attend regularly. Unlike in primary care where patients register with a GP practice, dental patients are not registered with a specific dental practice. This communication gap causes a challenge. Better communication with patients is required about how dentists allocate appointments, with each practice clearly showing the limits of what they can offer. This would create better understanding of dental ‘registration’ and what it means, as well as the importance of making and keeping appointments.
- **Review allocation of regular check-ups:** While increasing supply of units of dental activity to meet local needs is a significant priority, is there something that each dentist can currently do with their current allocation? National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines allow for a recall period of up to 2 years for adults and a year with children, subject to dentists’ clinical decision on a patient’s oral health and the patient’s agreement.¹ By extending the gap between appointments, where this was clinically appropriate, units of activity would be freed up for new patients. In Wakefield, this was done successfully and increased access for the local population.²
- **Provide better information to manage expectations:** Effective communication with patients on why they need to wait and insight into prioritisation will help manage expectations. Each surgery could state its allocation of NHS work and keep it updated, so patients understand the challenges, as well as provide information on other routes to access. New information explaining about the relationship between NHS work and private work and how they can take place at the same time in each practice, could be placed in relevant locations such as pharmacies.
- **Communicate costs better and engage with patients:** There is much confusion on why costs are much higher privately and how services may be different between NHS and private. Even for NHS services, two thirds are concerned about costs.

¹ NICE (2004) Dental checks: intervals between oral health reviews <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg19/chapter/Recommendations>

² Healthwatch Wakefield (2018) ‘Recall matters’ - New dental check-up intervals for people with healthy teeth. <https://www.healthwatchwakefield.co.uk/about-us/work-weve-done/recall-matters-new-dental-check-up-intervals-for-people-with-healthy-teeth/>

Clearer information on benefits exemptions is needed as well. NHS dentistry is very much appreciated by all who use it, even under challenging times, look to create a positive relationship with patient with open engagement, showing that dentists are listening to their concerns and responding. This also helps manage expectations.

You can view ‘Croydon residents’ experiences of accessing and using NHS dental services in 2021’ report here: <https://www.healthwatchcroydon.co.uk/learn-more/our-reports/>

Healthwatch Croydon also worked with its volunteer based to assessed 47 NHS dental practice websites in Croydon against nine areas that patients would expect to see in a website including: user friendliness, clear information on access, dental emergencies, NHS prices, COVID-19 safety, clear information between private and NHS costs, translation and whether the information was up to date.

One practice website achieved all areas, with five scoring eight out of nine, and 11 scoring seven. The average was just under five out of nine. This information has been shared with the Local Dental Committee and they are working with their members to ensure all website meet high standards learning from the good practice that exists with the Croydon dental community.

You can view the Service User Experience of Croydon Dentist Websites report here: <https://www.healthwatchcroydon.co.uk/learn-more/our-reports/>

Gordon Kay, Healthwatch Croydon Manager, said: “Over the last year, we have heard much about the experience of accessing and using dentists from Croydon residents. These two reports highlight many of the challenges for both patients and dentists. A service that is based on service allocation in 2006 is clearly not going to meet the demand and needs of the community, especially in a place like Croydon which has seen over 10% increase in residence in sixteen years. There are also a significant communications and expectations gap between what patients perceive and experience and what dentists can deliver under their current NHS contracts.

“We call upon NHS commissioners to look at what can be done to meet demand through a local needs assessment. Regular dental care can help solve dental problems before they

develop and highlight other health issues like cancer and diabetes at an early stage. Croydon needs dental services that meet demand.”

“We also see the need for much clear information on how dentists deliver the services, to help patients understand use the service better. Early on, Healthwatch Croydon took the decision to collaborate with the Local Dental Committee to explore this issue. We have valued the relationship learning much about the complexities of how services are commissioned and the impact this has for both dentist and patient. We look forward to working with them as part South West London Local Dental Committee, in raising profile of this essential health service, improving information about the services, and helping services meet patient need.”

Sushil John of the South West London Local Dental Committee said:

“Dental care is an important part of health and wellbeing and we were pleased that Healthwatch Croydon undertook a report into the experiences of residents accessing care during the pandemic. Dental practices worked hard during the pandemic to provide as much care as possible and it is heartening to hear that those who accessed services were satisfied with their care. Much more needs to be done, however, to place dental services in Croydon on a secure and sustainable footing so that more people can access dental care in a timely manner. We look forward to working with Healthwatch Croydon and other local partners to secure the dental care that Croydon requires and deserves.”

Sushil’s additional comments on the dental website report:

“We will support improvements to our members’ websites based on the feedback in Healthwatch Croydon’s report, and welcome all feedback which leads to improved services.”

Rachel Flowers, Croydon’s director of public health, said:

“We are aware of the issues around accessing dental services in Croydon, which have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing national commissioning issues. We are committed to continuing strategic work with the Local Dental Committee, NHS England and NHS Improvement to reduce oral health inequalities in the borough.”

Editor's notes

Healthwatch Croydon is here to improve the experience that Croydon people have when they need to use health and social care services. We believe that the best way to do this is by listening to patients and service users.

There is a local Healthwatch in every local authority area in England.

Our role is to make sure that that local health and social care services, and the local decision makers, put the experiences of people at the heart of their care.

We are a statutory body - this means that we have a legal status to exist within the Health and Social Care Act 2012. This means decision-makers should listen to us when we give them feedback and make suggestions.

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