

Dentistry in Norfolk Update 2023/24

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Summary

The difficulty of accessing NHS dental care remains a concern for many people in Norfolk. The percentage of enquiries about accessing dentistry was 42% between January 2023 and January 2024, only a slight drop since we last compiled figures on this issue for the period between January 2022 and January 2023. You can read more about our previous study and download the report at <https://healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/news/nhs-dental-care-in-norfolk/>

No dental practices we contacted are registering new NHS patients for care of any age in Norfolk, and one is offering a check-up for children but cannot register them as patients.

We are hearing from many patients that their practices are moving away from NHS care.

There are some improvements around accessing emergency appointments via the 111 service, but some patients are still struggling to get help.

The impact of the national Dental Recovery Plan and how it will improve things, and how the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (ICB) will tackle the issues around NHS non-emergency dental care in Norfolk, are not yet clear.

Healthwatch Norfolk will aim to look at the issues, share patient stories and ask key people to update us on the progress being made to deal with the problems we are hearing about at the first Healthwatch Norfolk Dental Summit being held on September 19 at The Garage in Norwich.

Background

Previous research findings

Healthwatch Norfolk carried out a similar exercise 12 months ago. The percentage of enquiries we received had only dropped slightly from 43 to 42 per cent so it remains a concern for people in the county.

Last year's survey also found the lack of access related to all demographics and with a range of medical issues.

Healthwatch Norfolk also carried out detailed research on dental issues in Norfolk in July 2021. You can read more at <https://healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/news/nhs-dental-care-in-norfolk/>

Key findings included limited NHS provision, dentists not taking on new NHS patients, and vulnerable people missing out on care. Emergency treatment for non-registered patients was an issue. This has partly been tackled by the ability to refer for an emergency appointment via the 111 service although some dentists told us they no longer had the capacity to help with that in our 2024 survey.

Concerns raised by Norfolk's Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee (HOSC)

Specific worries about dentistry were raised by Norfolk's Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) in autumn 2022 prior to our previous sampling. The key concerns included:

- Better engagement with children and young people about oral health.
- The 111 emergency referral service not working.
- 'Closed lists' at most NHS practices.
- Concerns that the business mix of offering both NHS and private care is not working.

In November 2023, Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (ICB) presented a report on dental services. Sadie Parker, its Director of Primary Care, said the board's three priorities were:

- Listening to the view of local dental professionals.
- Considering how the dental workforce could be strengthened.
- Listening to feedback from patients about improving treatment and access.

A short-term dental plan had been produced in September 2023 which included piloting an urgent service pilot, investment in oral health intervention and prevention for children, and a short-term workforce plan which included incentives to attract people to Norfolk.

A longer-term Dental Recovery Plan is due to be published in March 2024.

Other key discussion points from the November meeting were:

- A need for further exploration of overseas recruitment of dentists.
- Limited interest in dentists doing their post-schooling Foundation Training.
- Discussions with the Nursing School at the College of West Anglia around the possibility of training dental nurses.

Overall, the ICB said it would be a long time until general access to dentistry was improved and it could not put a timeframe on when this will happen.

You can read the full minutes from the meeting at <https://bit.ly/HOSCAutumn2023>

"I was due to see my NHS dentist in April to check a temporary filling and possibly add a crown. The practice phoned and cancelled my appointment as the dentist had left and they had no idea of the start date for a new dentist."

What we found out

The figures for the 12-month period January 12, 2023, to January 12, 2024

Telephone calls and email enquiries

We received 137 enquires from people unable to access NHS dental care out of a total of 323 enquiries on all health and social care issues. That equates to 42 per cent of all our enquiries between January 12, 2023, and January 12, 2024.

There were an additional seven enquiries over that period specifically about quality of dental care.

Website and face-to-face feedback

We received a total of 37 reviews based on experiences at 18 different dentists.

Three-quarters of these were around getting access to appointments/care

Who we heard from

The concerns around dentistry access continue to affect everyone across Norfolk. We have heard from people in a range of demographics.

- We heard from people of every age including young families, students, working-age people, and elderly people.
- People with children aged 1 to 16 told us they struggled to register them as NHS patients for the first time.
- We have heard from those with disabilities or long-term health conditions who are unable to get care.
- Some of those told us they rely on benefits or Universal Credit and cannot afford private care.
- People with mental health issues also told us their health had been significantly affected by their dental issues.
- Some people were also concerned they were using too many painkillers to help them control the discomfort of oral health issues.

Current situation February 2024

We contacted a total of 53 dental practices, 52 from Norfolk and one from Suffolk which is taking NHS patients from Norfolk. We ensured they were spread across all the local council areas of the county and, where possible, we picked from a variety of locations within those areas.

We asked them if they were accepting adult and child patients on an NHS basis. These calls were carried out on February 2 and 9, 2024. The full list of feedback can be found at Appendix 1.

The key findings were:

- No practices we spoke to were treating new NHS patients. One (Diss Dental Health Centre) would do a one-off check up for children but would not be able to see them beyond that for NHS non-emergency care.
- A fifth do not have the capacity to take on private patients.
- There were long waiting lists at some practices to be seen as an NHS patient. West Earlham Dental Practice in Norwich said it had 4000 people on its list and Dentistry For You at Marham, near Swaffham, had a list of almost 6000 people.
- Six per cent now have no capacity to deal with emergencies referred to them by the 111 service.
- It was also difficult to get through to many practices. Grovefield Surgery in North Walsham had a message saying 'calls cannot be connected,' and it was not possible to get an answer at two practices despite hanging on for 10 minutes at Lynn Road Dental Practice in King's Lynn and 15 minutes at All Saints Green Dental Practice in Norwich.
- Spixworth Dental Practice said a dentist has increased their hours to see more existing patients to help as many people as they can.
- Clarence House Dental Surgery in Watton was trying to recruit an NHS dentist and has posted job vacancies.
- Patients told us that more dental practices have moved to only offering treatment privately in the last 12 months.
- There is a huge demand for new NHS practices when they open. According to the Eastern Daily Press, Smile Dental Practice opened a new site on King's Lynn High Street offering 1000 NHS places in May 2023 planning to offer 100 a day over 10 days. At least 300 queued to get one of those spots on the first day gaining local and national media attention, and was dubbed a 'Soviet-style' scene in the media. Read more at <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/23496670.300-people-queue-kings-lynn-nhs-dentist/> Three new dental services were also set up in Norfolk and Waveney to ease capacity in Norwich, King's Lynn, and across the county border in Lowestoft. By May 2023, all three practices were full caring for their total NHS allocation of 4343 adults and 2449 children, according to the Eastern Daily Press at <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/23555999.norfolk-dental-crisis-new-dentists-full-year/>

National Dental Recovery Plan

The Government announced its nationwide Dental Recovery Plan in February 2024. Whilst the precise details of how it will help Norfolk are not yet clear, some of the key policies and initiatives announced included:

- Bonuses to encourage dentists to take on more NHS patients, and 'golden hello' payments for dentists to work in under-served areas.
- A dental vans service taking care to targeted rural and coastal areas that are struggling with a lack of NHS dental services.
- A Smile For Life initiative which includes offering reception-age children prevention measures to reduce dental decay, mobile dental teams going into schools in areas where there is a lack of NHS dental care, and Family Hubs providing advice and support for pregnant mums about the importance of oral health for them and their children.
- A pledge to increase dental undergraduate training places by 40 per cent to more than 1,100 by 2031-32.
- A parallel pledge for a 40 per cent increase in training places for dental therapists and other dental care professionals by 2031-32.
- Cutting bureaucracy and increasing exam capacity to reduce recruitment barriers for qualified dentists to work here from overseas.

"I have been a patient at my practice for about 25 years until they advised me they were no longer taking NHS patients. I was devastated we could be offloaded like this."

Conclusion

It appears, based on our findings, that access to NHS non-emergency dental care is no better than it was 12 months ago. While new NHS practices have meant care for some patients, that has been offset by more practices opting out of the NHS and only offering private care.

Some of the key issues remain outside local control as they are linked to Government contracts. Equally, the Government's Dental Recovery Plan announced by Whitehall is promising further support.

In Norfolk, we await the publication of the ICB's long-term dental plans for the county.

"I have gone private now at a different dental practice, as my previous NHS one would not see me for toothache."

What next?

We recognise that we can only help to influence national policy and changes around issues like contracts by continuing to ensure the feedback of people from the county is shared with decision-makers on a local, regional, and national basis.

We are keen to see what the Norfolk and Waveney ICB's plans are for increasing the availability of NHS dental care in the area and will share information about this with communities around the county.

It is important we have the most up-to-date information about dental care from the residents whose voices we capture. This Spring/Summer, we will be encouraging people to share their experiences in person, via email, in writing, or on video. These will form part of some follow-up work in late summer/early autumn to understand what progress has been made on an area of health care which concerns many of Norfolk's communities.

Our findings will be reported back at Healthwatch Norfolk's first Dental Summit which will take place in September 2024, six months on from the publication of the county's long term dental plan. This will be a platform for health managers to update people on progress, find out from dentists about the issues they face, and share some useful information about protecting our oral health.

This will also importantly be a gauge of progress around improving NHS dental care access. While we accept this will take time, we want to ensure every effort is made to ensure progress on improving services to open more NHS treatment and support to more of the county's population.

Appendix 1

Data from phone-calls/inquiries to Norfolk dental practices

Healthwatch Norfolk dental survey responses

Practice name	Council area	Taking adult patients?		Taking child patients?	Notes
		NHS	Private		
Beech House Dental Surgery, Dereham	Breckland	n	y	n	
Bupa Dental Care Centre, Dereham	Breckland	n	n	n	In call queue and never spoke to anyone
Clarence House Dental Surgery, Watton	Breckland	n	y	n	Cannot take 111 emergency referrals
Dentistry For You, Marham	Breckland	n	y	n	Almost 6000 patients on waiting list for NHS care, new private dentist starting
Mr J Holmes and Associates, Swaffham	Breckland	n	n	n	
MyDentist, Thetford	Breckland	n	y	n	Only take private patients
Rookwood Dental Practice, Attleborough	Breckland	n	y	n	Will take on new NHS patients when they have capacity to treat them.
Aylsham Dental Practice	Broadland	n	y	n	
Brundall Dental Practice	Broadland	-	-	-	Always on voicemail when we rang
Costa Dental Practice, Drayton	Broadland	-	-	-	Only offers domiciliary dentistry
Friends Dental Practice, Sprowston	Broadland	-	-	-	Always on voicemail when we rang
MyDentist, Aylsham	Broadland	y	n	n	Offer My Options service which is a hybrid service of half private/half NHS
Station House Dental Practice, Stalham	Broadland	n	y	n	
Acle Dental Surgery	Great Yarmouth	n	y	n	
Bupa Dental Care, Gorleston	Great Yarmouth	n	n	n	Not accepting new patients
Crown Road Dental Care, Great Yarmouth	Great Yarmouth	-	-	-	No answer or response to voicemail
Hopton Dental Surgery	Great Yarmouth	n	y	n	
John G Plummer, Great Yarmouth	Great Yarmouth	n	y	n	
MyDentist, Gorleston	Great Yarmouth	n	y	n	

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Practice name	Council area	Taking adult patients?		Taking child patients?	Notes
		NHS	Private		
Ormesby Dental Care	Great Yarmouth	n	y	n	
Bupa Dental Care, North Walsham	North Norfolk	n	y	n	Only have a private waiting list and are trying to recruit a private dentist as they are one short
Compass Clinic, Holt	North Norfolk	n	n	n	Fully private practice
Corner House Dental Practice, Cromer	North Norfolk	n	y	n	
Grovefield Surgery, North Walsham	North Norfolk	n	y	n	
Mr G Enslin, Cromer	North Norfolk	n	n	n	
MyDentist, North Walsham	North Norfolk	n	n	n	Cannot accept new patients
The Dental Design Studio, North Walsham	North Norfolk	-	-	-	Message on phone saying the phone system is 'closed' and appointments cannot be offered
Together Dental, Carlton Lodge, Sheringham	North Norfolk	n	y	n	Can't have an NHS waiting list due to backlog of patients
All Saints Green Practice	Norwich	n	y	n	Hung on phone for 15 minutes but no answer. **March 2024, we did call again and call wait was 4 minutes
Cathedral Street Dental Practice	Norwich	n	y	n	Also not taking 111 referrals
Corner House Dental Practice	Norwich	n	y	n	A fully private practice
Reepham Road Dental Care	Norwich	n	y	n	No waiting list. Offer the Denplan scheme
Riverside Dental Practice	Norwich	n	y	n	
Together Dental, Earlham Road	Norwich	n	y	n	Not running an NHS patient waiting list
Treetops Dental Practice	Norwich	n	y	n	
West Earlham Dental Health Practice	Norwich	n	n	n	Waiting list of over 4000 people for NHS treatment

Healthwatch Norfolk dental survey responses

Practice name	Council area	Taking adult patients?		Taking child patients?	Notes
		NHS	Private		
Beechcroft Dental Practice, New Costessey	South Norfolk	n	y	n	
Diss Dental Health Centre	South Norfolk	n	y	y	Children cannot be registered as NHS patients but can have a one-off NHS check-up
Fair Green Dental Health Practice, Diss	South Norfolk	n	y	n	
Hethersett Dental Surgery	South Norfolk	n	y	n	
Loddon Dental Practice	South Norfolk	n	y	n	
MyDentist, Wymondham	South Norfolk	n	y	n	
Downham Market Dental Care	West Norfolk	n	y	n	
Grange Dental Surgery, Snettisham	West Norfolk	-	-	-	No answer on phone but Find A Dentist website says the practice is not taking new NHS patients
Hall Farm Dental Surgery, Roydon	West Norfolk	-	-	-	Phone went straight to voicemail. Find A Dentist website says the practice is not taking new patients
Hunstanton Dental Practice	West Norfolk	n	-	n	No answer on phone or voicemail but Find A Dentist website says it is not taking new NHS patients
Lynn Road Dental Practice, King's Lynn	West Norfolk	n	y	n	10 minute waiting time on the phone
The Dental Design Studio	King's Lynn	n	y	n	




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