

Hertfordshire Dentists - Are their NHS Entries or websites providing up to date information for NHS patients?

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Background

About Healthwatch Hertfordshire:

Healthwatch Hertfordshire (HwH) represents the views of people in Hertfordshire for health and social care services. We provide an independent consumer voice for evidencing patient and public experiences and gathering local intelligence with the purpose of influencing service improvement across the county. We work with those who commission, deliver and regulate health and social care services to ensure the people's voice is heard and to address gaps in service quality and/or provision.

About NHS England and Improvement East of England:

NHS England and NHS Improvement East of England is one of seven regional teams that support the commissioning of high quality services and directly commission primary care and specialised services including dentistry.

NHS England and NHS Improvement's role in dental commissioning is to ultimately achieve excellence and consistency in the commissioning of dental specialties in England to reduce inequalities, improve care for patients to ensure they are receiving the highest quality dental care in the most appropriate setting delivered by professionals with the required skill set, resulting in improved health outcomes for patients and ensuring value for money for the taxpayer.

About Local Dental Networks:

Local Dental Networks are a key part of providing multidisciplinary sustainable leadership for the NHS and work across commissioning and provider services. They are hosted and supported by their local team to improve outcomes for patients through clinical focus, medical expertise and collaboration.

Why we looked at the websites and NHS Entries for Hertfordshire Dental Practices

Dental practices were ordered to close as part of the first lockdown in March 2020 because of the initial impact of Covid-19. After the resumption of dental services in June 2020, patients were contacting our signposting service unable to find NHS treatment due to the backlog of treatments, coupled with the reduction in available dental appointments due to the increased safety measures that dentists had to put in place to provide a safe environment for patients and staff.



As new processes have been put in place to enable patients to obtain urgent dental treatment (e.g. Urgent Dental Care Hubs and NHS 111 being commissioned to take more responsibility in finding treatment for patients) the situation has improved for those in immediate pain. However for routine care and treatment, we are now hearing from patients that they have been taken off dental practices' lists without any prior communication¹ and have found they are now unable to obtain NHS dental treatment from their usual dentist and struggling to find a new dentist taking NHS patients that meets their needs.

In January 2021, NHS England and NHS Improvement East of England and Local Dental Networks of the East of England sent out an 'Expectations and Efficiencies' letter to all dental practices with NHS contracts which included the following statements:

Practices will demonstrate they are available to see patients for face-to-face NHS care and indicate their contracted opening hours by:

a) Maintaining their NHS UK (NHS Choices) profile up to date to show they are available to accept:

i) urgent patients within the NHS

ii) all age groups (unless their GDS/PDS contract indicates otherwise)

iii) accepting adults entitled to free NHS dental care

iv) their NHS contracted opening hours

v) accessibility (e.g. Wheelchair access, disabled WC, induction loops etc)

vi) parking availability

b) Advising on the 'landing page' of their website that they are accepting all patients for face-to-face NHS care including urgent care for all age groups, in a similar manner to the information provided on the NHS UK website.

[The NHS website - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk) is one of the key sources of information that NHS England says is available for the public to find a local dentist that is accepting NHS patients, but patients were finding this was not being kept up to date, resulting in patients ringing a large number of dentists to try and find treatment - mostly unsuccessfully.

¹ The information on the NHS website states '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.' [How to find an NHS dentist - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk). It also states '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 this does not mean you have guaranteed access to an NHS dental appointment in the future.'



What We Did

We spoke with NHSEI who were very supportive of this piece of work and they were able to provide us with a spreadsheet of all the Hertfordshire dental practice that have an NHS contract of any type. We took out the obvious orthodontic contracts as these would be by referral only and were left with 157 dental practices to audit. It should be noted that NHS dental contracts in Hertfordshire vary in size and many may be either small or limited to only children and adults who are eligible for free dental care.

Using a checklist, 6 volunteers and 1 staff member audited both the NHS entry and the website of the 157 dental practices over a three-week period from 8th March to 28th March 2021.

A telephone audit of a sample of the dental practices who stated they were accepting NHS patients was also carried out in the same period. (Note: March is the last month of the financial year and therefore a busy time for dentists trying to meet their targets. This can have a negative impact on the availability of NHS appointments.)

From 17th May to the 28th June we ran a survey on our website to ask about people's experiences of accessing dental services over the past few months, to learn what worked well and what could be better. In total, 27 people responded to the survey which included 18 NHS patients, 5 private patients, 3 who did not attend a regular dentist and 1 who was not sure if they were NHS or private. For most participants, routine appointments have resumed since June 2020.

Summary of Results:

The NHS Website

If you want to find a dentist you go the NHS website and enter a town, city or postcode in England. This will give a list of dental practices starting with the closest. Each entry covers:

- **Contact Details** - address, phone, online (email and website if available). Directions that open in Google maps is included as standard.
- Is this dentist taking on new NHS patients?
- Opening Times
- Accessibility
- Parking
- What patients say

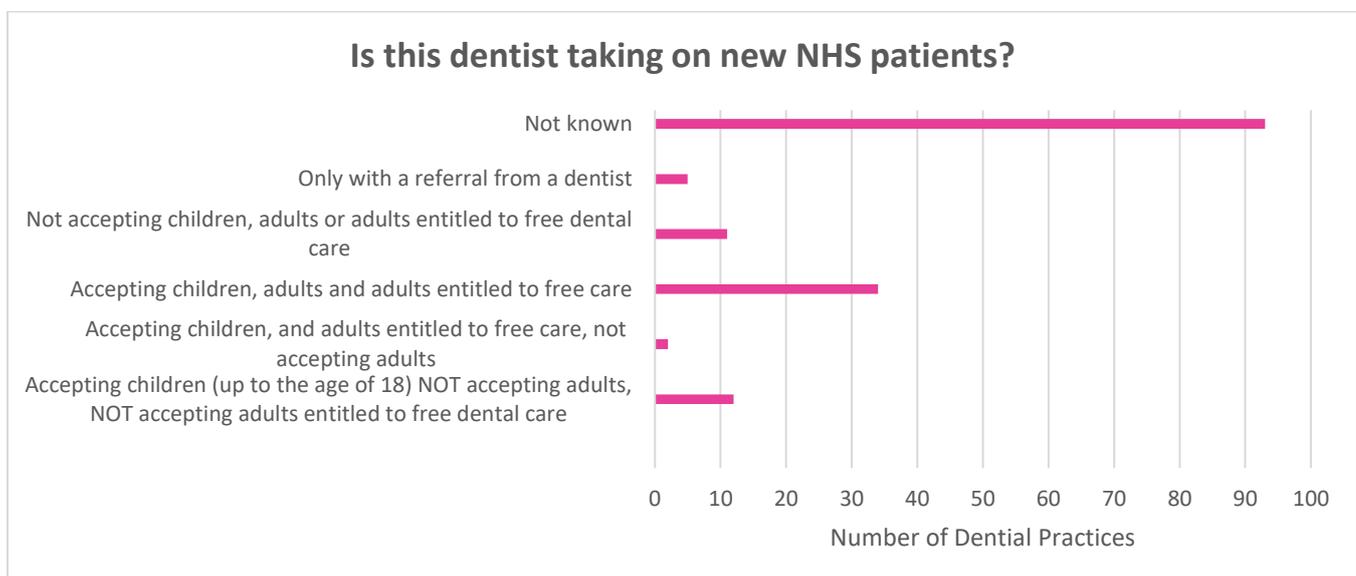


It should be noted that whilst NHS England see the NHS Website as the key source of information for patients, contractually NHS England cannot make dentists update their entries, only recommend. Dentists update or maintain their entries on a voluntary basis.

Is this dentist taking on new NHS patients?

This section should state what type of patient the dentist is taking on currently e.g. children, adults entitled to free dental care, or adults (18 and over). It should also say if the dentist is **not** taking on any of these patients. However if the dental practice has not supplied any information in the last 90 days, no details will be available other than the last time the entry had been updated.

Our audit found that nearly 60% of the dental practices (93) had no information available so it was 'not known' if they were accepting NHS patients. When the entry for these practices was last updated ranged from 2011 to 2020.



Only 22% (34) were accepting all patients with less than 1% (11) actually stating they were not accepting new NHS patients.

Opening Times

Opening times were generally not regularly updated, though there were a few practices that had taken the time to review the entry in 2020 or 2021, sometimes when they had updated their availability.



Accessibility

No accessibility information could be found on 32% of dental practice websites. Those that did provide information included whether they had an induction loop, braille, text relay, signing service, disabled WC, step free access or wheelchair access. Many had very old dates since they were last updated.

Car Parking

A further 43% of dental practices had no car parking information. Those that did have information were able to say if car parking was for disabled only or cycle only. For the patient it would give an indication as to how accessible the practice was, combined with the accessibility information. Again, entries often had not been updated in many years and though nothing may have changed, it doesn't provide confidence that the information is correct.

What Patients Say

Volunteers were asked to see if patients had left any reviews in the last 10 months (since dental practices re-opened in June 2020).

About 60% of dental practices did not have any current reviews and some had no reviews recorded on the NHS website. Of those that did have reviews in the last 10 months, the majority were complimentary and often 5-star. One particular practice, which like most practices in Hertfordshire is a mix of NHS and private patients, had a large number of current reviews. This was typical of what patients said:

Every aspect of dental care from check-ups to hygiene appointments to specialist treatments are excellent - professional, expert, personal, friendly and reassuring (which I need!).

One additional factor that sets them apart is their incredible commitment to making the practice COVID safe. Since the beginning of the pandemic they have put a huge amount of time and resources into this - including high level filtration - which gives a safe experience during a visit. I'm shielding and don't go anywhere - but I have felt very confident to keep my dental and hygienist appointments.

Only a few were unhappy with their experience. For example, one person was complaining about the difference between the NHS and private care being offered as they were finding it difficult to get an NHS appointment.



Most dental practices had a small selection of reviews, but a few had significant numbers with one having over 20 reviews in 2021 (up to March) alone. This suggests that the practice has a proactive approach to gathering patient feedback which is not as evident for the majority of dental practices. This practice also took the time to respond to some of the reviews both positive and negative in a considered and patient focussed way. This practice also had an up-to-date NHS entry, though their website had only basic NHS fees information.

Telephone Mystery Shop of Dental Practices

During the audit, the volunteers were instructed to ring a random sample of the practices that gave information for NHS patients. They also selected some practices that had provided no information, to find out whether these might actually be taking NHS patients after all.

In total, 32 dental practices were called within the audit period and, though randomly chosen, they covered all the districts in Hertfordshire. The information from the NHS website for these 32 dental practices stated:

Accepting children, adults and adults entitled to free care	11
Accepting children (up to the age of 18) NOT accepting adults, NOT accepting adults entitled to free dental care	3
Only with a referral from a dentist	1
Not accepting children, adults (or adults entitled to free dental care)	2
No information supplied in the last 90 days	15

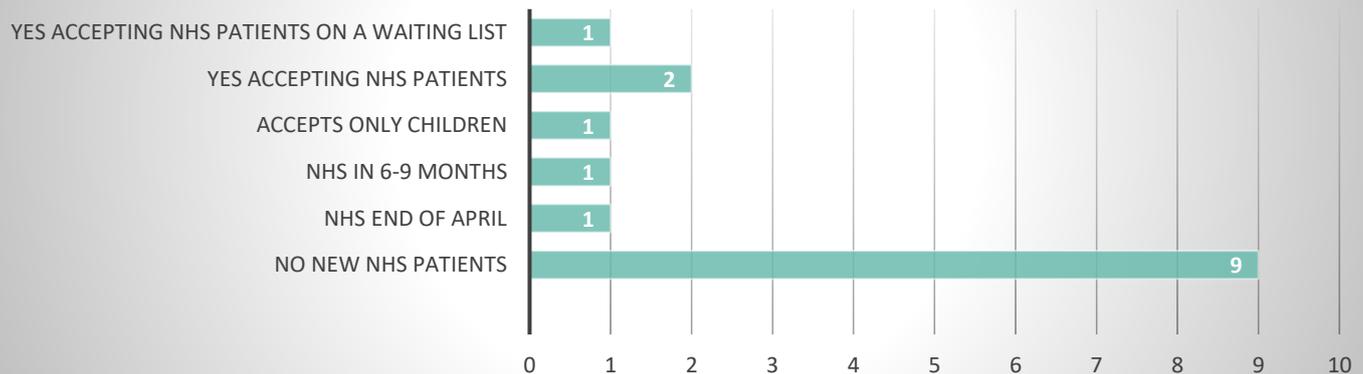
Of the 11 practices that said they were accepting new NHS patients, only three were doing so immediately, while two practices were operating a waiting list for April and two for June. One practice was only treating emergencies (though hoping to accept new patients in five weeks' time); one was treating existing NHS patients only and two were not taking any new NHS patients with one saying to try in 4-6 months' time.



The dental practices that were clear they were not accepting NHS patients, or only children, were still in this position with one confirming they were seeing existing NHS patients and one referring back to the NHS website to find an alternative dentist.

There were a number of different responses from the 15 dental practices that had not supplied any information on the NHS website. Whilst the majority were not accepting new NHS patients, six dental practices could accommodate NHS patients in some way. Of the nine dental practices not taking new NHS patients, several mentioned that funding was an issue and to 'try again in April or September'. One practice said 'they hadn't taken NHS patients for years!'

Responses where there was no information on the NHS website

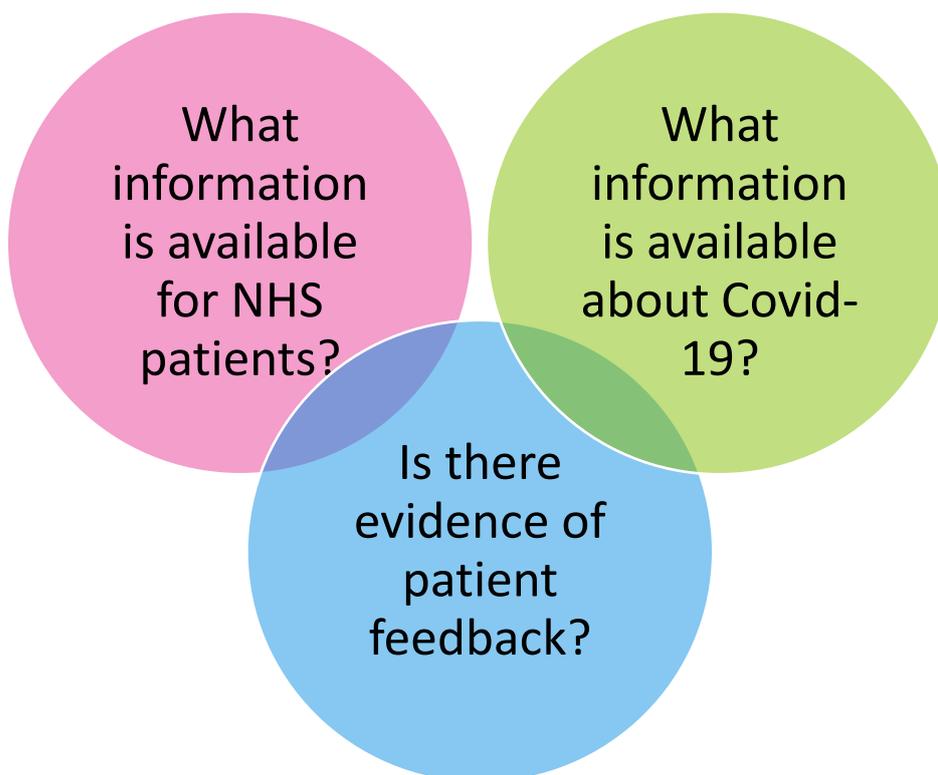


Our callers said, on the whole, receptionists were very polite and helpful with only a few being 'short' and unwilling to engage in any kind of conversation. There was some good practice identified where questions were asked about whether the caller had any immediate concerns with their teeth. One practice explained how registration for dental practices does not exist in a clear and friendly way and the caller just needed to ring when they wanted an appointment and they would see what they could do.



Dental Practice Websites

Our volunteers were asked to look at 3 key areas on each dental practice website:



What Information is available for NHS patients?

Volunteers were asked to see if there was any information for NHS patients on the 'Home' or landing page of the dental practice website. For the 157 dental practices reviewed we found:

28% had a simple statement about NHS treatment, usually on the 'home' page
11% only mentioned the NHS on specific pages such as 'about us', 'fees' or 'services' tabs
10% had more detailed information available for NHS patients on their website
4% clearly stated that they only accepted children or those qualifying for free NHS care

21% had no obvious website
18% did not mention the NHS at all
8% only displayed the NHS logo or link to the NHS website with no other information



Information that was available for NHS patients ranged from a simple statement sometimes with an NHS logo such as:

‘We are pleased to be offering urgent care NHS appointments’

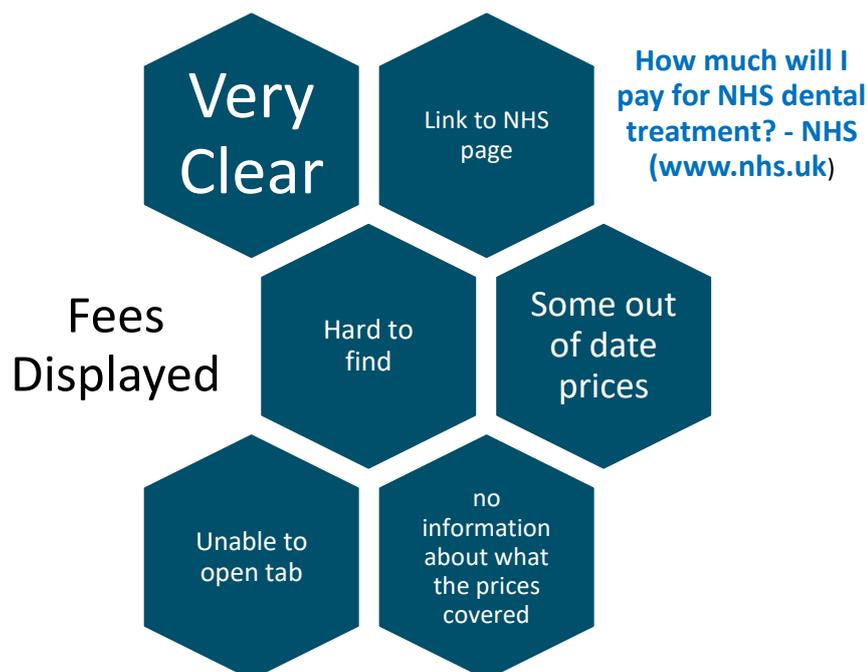
‘We are taking on new NHS and private patients’

Others had more detailed information including emergency care delivered by NHS 111 and dedicated pages for NHS patients. Some websites did not mention NHS care on their Home page but information could be found elsewhere on the site.

Where there were links to the NHS website, these were not always updated and were therefore of no help, but some did ensure the messages they were giving on their website reflected their updated status on the NHS website.

Volunteers were also asked to see if NHS fees were clearly displayed and they found that of those who did have a website, half did have fees displayed and half did not. Most dental practices that did display fees provided clear information about what was covered under the different bands, though not all.

A few were clear that they only treated patients that were exempt from charges and one who did not display fees said ‘there was a poster in the waiting room’!





What information is available about Covid-19?

As Covid-19 has had an impact on the way dental treatment is delivered, we wanted to see if dental practices provided information about how they were keeping patients safe and what a patient could expect when they attended their dental appointment.

For 26% of dental practices with a website there was no mention at all of Covid-19 - it was as if the pandemic had never happened.

For the other dental websites, messages and information about Covid-19 varied. As you would expect, larger providers such as Bupa and My Dentist had links to dedicated pages and videos or animations of what to expect, so that the patient is completely prepared before attending the dental practice. But it wasn't just the large practices providing good information, some of the smaller practices had personalised videos of their own practice and staff and reassuring messages about staff vaccination and Covid-19 lateral flow testing, which were excellent.

Many websites had pop up boxes or banners when entering the site and a detailed list of the rules and procedures that needed to be followed, as well as a message about the requirement to complete additional forms for Covid-19 health and safety.

For other practices, messages were brief. Some just said they were open and not to come early, others had fairly basic lists of instructions. Some information had not been updated since the June 2020 re-opening of services.

One volunteer commented:

While the websites generally said little about Covid-19, telephone answers usually started with detailed instructions.

Is there evidence of patient feedback?

Volunteers looked at how practices demonstrated that they listened to patients and acted on their feedback.

Unlike GP practices, NHS dental patients are not registered at a particular practice (though many think they are, particularly if they have attended regularly) and it is therefore hard to have any formal patient groups to provide feedback, though feedback should be collected at the practice.



About 35% had no reviews or testimonials on their website. Many of the others favoured un-dated testimonials or percentages of patient satisfaction, with only a few providing current feedback or links to the NHS website for reviews. Unsurprisingly the testimonials were all positive.

Our Dental Survey - What patients say

The feedback from our dental survey reflected the comments made on the NHS Website. Of the 14 participants who had visited a dentist since June 2020, all told us they were generally happy or very happy with the quality of their care, communication and Covid-19 safety measures.

1. How would you rate the quality of care you received when you visited your dental practice?

- 1 star: 7% (1)
- 2 stars: 7% (1)
- 3 stars: 0
- 4 stars: 21% (3)
- 5 stars: 64% (9)

Overall: 4.3 stars

2. How would you rate the Covid-19 related safety measures when you visited your dental practice?

- 1 star: 0
- 2 stars: 0
- 3 stars: 14% (2)
- 4 stars: 7% (1)
- 5 stars: 79% (11)

Overall: 4.6 stars

3. How would you rate the communication before, during, and after you visited your dental practice?

- 1 star: 7% (1)
- 2 stars: 7% (1)
- 3 stars: 0
- 4 stars: 14% (2)
- 5 stars: 71% (10)

Overall: 4.4 stars

Positive experiences reflected the friendliness and reassurance of dentists, as well as having the appropriate safety measures in place to support patients. Positive feedback also cited good communication from dental practices, again in providing reassurance and information.



“Friendly staff and dentists. Complementary toothpaste to take home. Hand sanitiser outside reception. Masks and gloves worn by all.”

“My dentist and their practice are amazing. Always totally patient focused, safe and compassionate. They also offer a wide range of services. Can’t speak highly enough of my own dentist, they have saved my teeth and provided options and clarity. Wonderful.”

“I was nervous about attending but the measures in place and communications reassured me enough to attend the appointment. When I arrived I felt taken care of and very safe. The practice is a good practice anyway, excellent customer service. I just wish they could take more NHS patients.”

Negative feedback primarily reflected poor communication from dental practices and finding it difficult obtaining NHS treatment.

Nine participants were unable to obtain NHS treatment since the reopening of services in June 2020 due to a lack of availability of NHS appointments.

“They would not give me an appointment saying call back in 2 months.”

“Just emergency only for some time. My first appointment was April 2021.”

“Routine appointments for NHS patients were not being accepted for my regular dentist. Private patients only being seen at present.”

Seven participants had a dental emergency and were treated at either an Urgent Dental Centre, Hospital, NHS dentist or as a private patient as they could not obtain NHS care for their problem. Positive experiences reflected receiving quality care from the relevant dental service, with safety measures in place and dentists providing reassurance.

Poor experiences were largely a result of patients not being able to receive treatment for their dental emergency because there were no NHS appointments available, or patients having to pay private dental fees in order to receive their treatment.



Conclusion

NHS Website

The NHS website does not support patients with up-to-date information on whether they are accepting new NHS patients or not. The majority of dentists had not supplied information for at least 90 days and in many cases not for some years. Even those that had supplied information were not always accurate. However as previously stated, updating the NHS Website is not mandated and completed by dentists on a voluntary basis. We also noted that a number of practices who had websites had not included that information on the NHS entry.

Whilst we accept that everyone is busy and the situation is rapidly changing due to the pressures on services caused by the pandemic, ensuring there are processes to at least update this section should not take up too much time and provide patients with the information they need without having to make numerous unnecessary calls to dentists or NHS 111.

Our mystery shop calls showed that some dentists with no information were in fact taking new NHS patients or compiling a waiting list.

However it is evident that the lack of information on the NHS website is not primarily caused by the pandemic. With so many entries not updated for many years, this seems to be something that many dental practices have not given any priority to for some time. Some practices have very small NHS contracts and may feel that they have no need to therefore update their NHS entry, but this is actually more reason to do so. Patients deserve to know what is available to them, so if a practice has a small NHS contract they can choose a 'Not accepting patients' option and just renew that every 90 days. A patient can then choose to call them knowing they may be offered private treatment instead. The NHS website is promoting some dental practices who in reality do not provide NHS treatment to adults, but the public does not know this.

Other information around accessibility, car parking and opening hours should have a regular review schedule even if there is no change, so that patients can be confident that the information is accurate, particularly in a time of uncertainty and change.

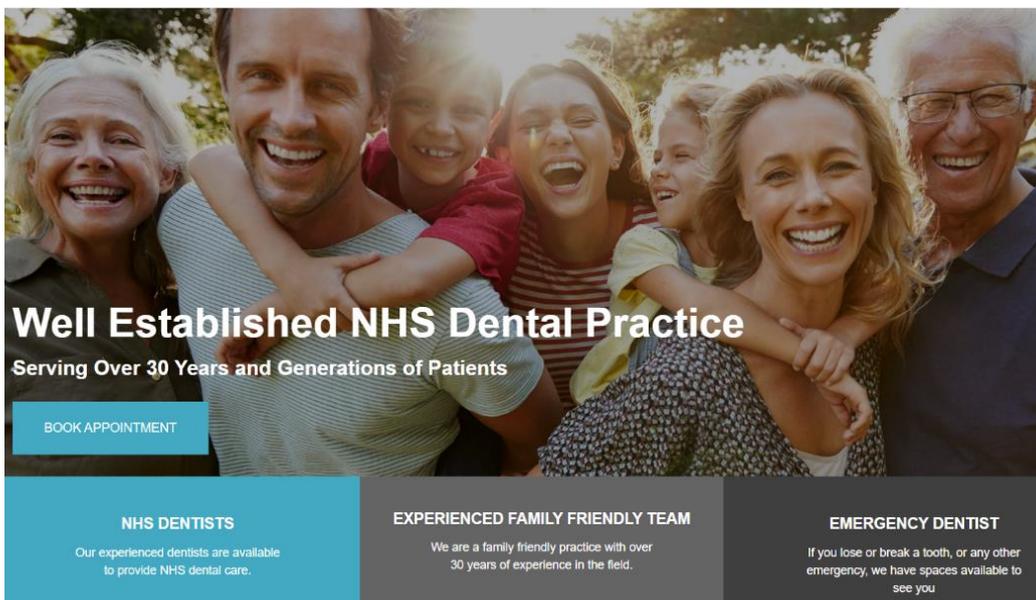
Dentist Own Websites

The quality and quantity of information on the dental practice own websites varied enormously. It was surprising to find that 33 dental practices didn't have their own website although we have



been told that many well established practices don't feel the need to have a website as they rely on word of mouth for referrals. Those that are part of a larger group unsurprisingly had more resources available to explain about the impact of Covid-19 on the dental visit, but some smaller practices were also able to provide some quite personalised videos or photos of what it was now like for a patient coming for treatment at their practice. This is a very good way to support patients, particularly those who are nervous of having treatment or about how Covid-19 secure the practice is.

While most websites focused on their main business (either private dental care or cosmetic procedures) and it was hard to find information on NHS services, a couple did have NHS focussed Home pages but unfortunately had not updated their NHS entry in years!



It was hard to know if information on the practice websites was up to date and therefore patients would still feel unsure if dentists are taking on new patients or offering routine care. Those with small NHS contracts treating children or exempt patients should make this clear on the website, or have a link to the NHS website rather than have no mention of NHS treatment at all.



Recommendations

1. NHSEI East of England and the Local Dental Network to regularly remind dental practices of the benefit to patients of updating the NHS entry. This should include:
 - a. That all information is fully completed including opening times, facilities and accessibility but most importantly whether or not they are accepting new NHS patients.
 - b. Practices have a process in place to update the NHS entry regularly, particularly in rapidly changing circumstances.
 - c. Information is consistent across all platforms (NHS, own website and at physical location).
 - d. Where practices have small or children only NHS contracts, they ensure that they update the NHS entry as a minimum every 90 days.
 - e. Agree a standard regular review date for updating accessibility, car parking and opening times so that the public can be confident these are accurate.

Note: At the end of July 2021 NHS England said that ‘alongside Minister Jo Churchill² we wrote to practices requesting they update their NHS profiles as a matter of priority.’ This letter also references the Healthwatch England report and recommendation to improve patient information. [Dentistry during COVID-19 insight briefing | Healthwatch](#)



Dental_profiles_letter.
pdf

2. When NHSEI resume dental reform discussions, to ensure information access for NHS patients is included in any new plans so that quality and consistency of information provided for NHS patients is improved and people have a clear picture of where and how they can access services and the charges they will need to pay.

² Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care at the Department of Health and Social Care.



NHSEI also announced at the end of July 2021 that:

NHS website has launched new service pages for dentists as part of a programme of work to improve the care and experience offered to patients. Last August, dentist profiles were refreshed to give them a clean, modern design in keeping with the rest of the NHS website. The new service pages sit within these profiles and provide information on NHS treatment costs and better reflect the range of NHS-funded dental services.

3. Dental practices to ensure their information is up to date and clear for NHS patients and includes out of hours and emergency information on their websites. If they have limited NHS contracts, this should be clearly explained on their website.



Herts LDC appreciated being involved in this report and look forward to future collaborations. We share a joint goal in ensuring that patients receive the most appropriate dental treatment within the limitations of the current NHS contacts.

These coming years will be full of change as we move to a relaxation of Covid restrictions that currently restrict how we provide care. We will then be able to catch up with the backlog of outstanding dental care we know is there.



Peter Tatton, Hertfordshire Local Dental Committee Secretary

Thank you

We would like to thank:

- Our volunteers
- NHSEI East of England and the Local Dental Network Chairs for supporting this work
- Hertfordshire Local Dental Committee for their continued support and for consistently sharing our findings from our work on dentistry with their members