

# Making an NHS Dental Appointment

A mystery shopper exercise  
in Dudley borough

March 2025



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## Best practice

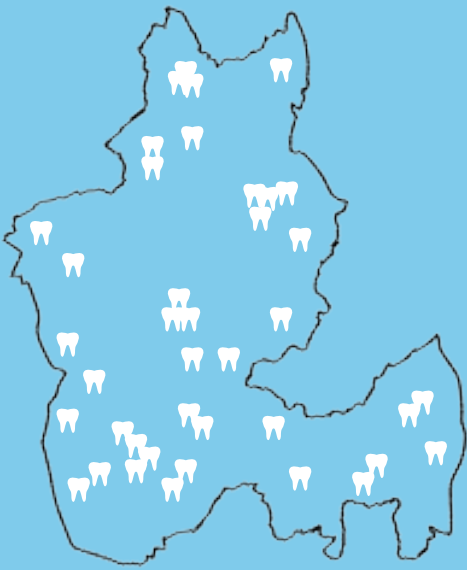
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# Access to dental services



40

NHS dental practices  
across Dudley borough

## A national issue

People across Dudley borough have told us they find it difficult to access NHS dental treatment.

This is not just a local issue, Healthwatch England found 16% of people were unable to get an NHS dental appointment in the past two years.

With the cost of living crisis impacting people's finances, less people have the option of paying for private dental care.

Cost implications and NHS availability could prevent people from seeking treatment for a dental problem. Waiting to get treatment could lead to worsening conditions which could impact a patient's health and wellbeing, and increases the financial long-term burden on the NHS.

## Looking locally

We wanted to see what the picture is like in Dudley borough. We contacted all 40 dental practices across Dudley borough that offer NHS appointments.

This exercise forms part of our wider research in 2025 exploring people's experiences of NHS dental care in Dudley borough.

## Working together

Healthwatch Dudley joined forces with Dudley Council's Children and Young Peoples Public Health Team (CYPT) and an NHS Consultant in Dental Public Health to explore the availability of NHS dental appointments in Dudley borough.

# What we did

**120 calls**  
made to **40 practices.**

**10 staff and volunteers**  
made calls over two months.

We called all 40 practices in the borough that were listed on NHS 111 as providers of NHS appointments. We attempted to contact each practice on three occasions to try to book an appointment for three different scenarios. Calls were made from October to November 2024.

We worked with an NHS Consultant in Dental Public Health to develop three different scenarios where someone may seek NHS dental treatment.

The three scenarios were: routine appointment for an adult and a child, urgent appointment for an adult and urgent appointment for a child.

## The three scenarios

### Routine

Adult and three year old child. The adult's last dental appointment was five years ago and child never seen due to COVID-19. They are looking for an NHS check-up as their old dental practice no longer offers NHS appointments.



### Adult Urgent

Adult with a suspected abscess, experiencing pain and swelling around their tooth. Pain eases with paracetamol. Looking for NHS appointment.



### Child Urgent

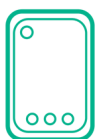
Parent of five year old child who has suspected abscess. Pain and swelling around their tooth. Pain eases with Calpol. Looking for an NHS appointment.



## Recording data



A script was developed to ensure consistency across all calls. The script explored: availability of appointments, the advice and guidance provided by the call handler\* and the difference between NHS and private availability.



Up to three call attempts were made to contact a practice for each scenario. Results shown reflect the practices that answered calls.



Quantitative data (calls answered, number of appointments available) and qualitative data (quotes from phone calls and feedback from callers\*) were collected and analysed using Smart Survey and Microsoft Excel.

*\*see page 17 for terminology*

# Appointment availability

*“There are no NHS appointments being offered as the budget for NHS patients has been used in the current financial year.”*

## Routine Call

### Routine Call – Case Study

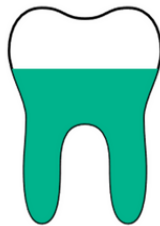
One caller requesting routine appointments, was informed that they would have to attend the practice to be registered. After registration they would be able to receive an appointment “quickly”.

#### The issue

The NHS dental contract does not require patients to register with a practice to see a dentist. The added condition of registering in person presents a further barrier for people who may struggle to attend the practice. Such as those with caring responsibilities, limited mobility or limited access to transport.

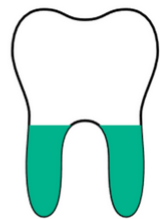
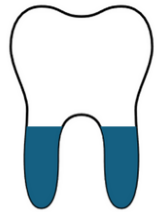
We asked if practices were offering routine or urgent NHS appointments.

After speaking to the practices about the three scenarios, not all practices were able to offer an appointment. Urgent appointments were offered most often which demonstrates a prioritisation in offering NHS appointments to those who are in most need.



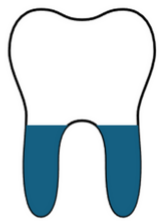
68% of practices said they do routine NHS appointments...

but only 42% ultimately offered an appointment.



45% of practices said they do urgent NHS appointments...

and 45% did ultimately offer an appointment.



There was no significant difference in availability of urgent appointments for adults (44%) and children (45%).

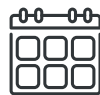
## Reasons for not offering an NHS appointment:



Being at ‘clinical capacity’



Practice requested callers register before an appointment could be offered ([find out more on page 7](#))



Not having availability

The difference between a practice offering appointments and actually providing an appointment could be down to how a practice prioritises appointment allocation.

*“The practice said there are no NHS spaces, they are at capacity.”*

## Child Urgent Call

# Appointment availability

*"Our practice has no NHS spaces at the moment. There is a waiting list to go on for April onwards or call 111."*

**Child Urgent Call**

*"The practice could not offer NHS appointments until January but people can be added to a list in case something came up."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

## NHS Quotas

With the NHS dental contract, dental practices now provide 'units of dental care.' Practices are paid to provide a set number of units, after which the dental practice is not paid for providing further NHS treatment. Over half of the practices we spoke to mentioned reaching these quotas.



**of practices said they had "reached their quota" for NHS appointments.**

## Future availability

Some practices advised callers to try calling again at a future date when they would have more availability of NHS appointments.

*"The receptionist informed me that routine appointments could not be booked until January 2025."*

**Routine Call**

Availability of appointments may depend on the time of year. Units of NHS dental care are allocated in April each year. This could result in longer waits towards the end of the contracted year. Further exploration is needed to see if care is consistent throughout the year.



# Registration

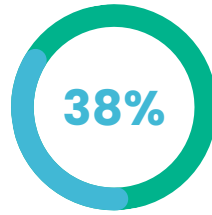
*"They said that my family had to be registered to get an appointment. They suggested I call 111 for an emergency dentist instead."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

*"The practice only sees NHS patients who don't have to pay for their treatment."*

**Routine Call**

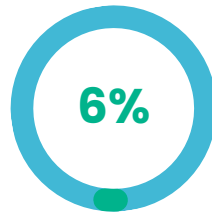
We found that practices across Dudley borough would ask callers to register or ensure they met 'eligibility criteria' before offering an appointment.



of practices asked callers to register for a routine appointment.

*"I was asked if I was registered with them. I said no, and they asked for my details to register me."*

**Adult Urgent Call**



of practices mentioned eligibility criteria to book a routine appointment.

*"The practice is not taking on NHS patients currently. Only people who are on certain benefits, such as income support."*

**Routine Call**

No practices mentioned eligibility criteria for urgent appointments. However, some practices did request callers register with the practice in order to make an urgent appointment (19% for adult; 13% for child).

## Did you know?

Patients are entitled to receive treatment from an NHS dental practice that works for them, regardless of location, provided that the practice has availability.

**According to the NHS dental contract, patients do not need to register with an NHS dental practice in order to receive NHS treatment.**

The contract also means a dentist has no long-term obligation to see patients on the NHS unless: they are undergoing active treatment or if their dental work, already carried out, is under guarantee.

# Urgent appointments

Callers were more likely to be offered an urgent appointment than a routine appointment.

There was not a significant difference in the availability of urgent appointments between the adult and child scenarios.

*“Straight away offered a cancellation [NHS] appointment for 10:15 the next day.”*

**Adult Urgent Call**

42% of practices offered a routine NHS appointment

45% of practices offered an urgent NHS appointment.

Urgent appointments had a shorter waiting time than routine appointments.

For an urgent child appointment the average wait was three days, for an urgent adult appointment the wait was two days.

One caller noted how they were not offered an urgent appointment until they described more symptoms.

*“Initially, the practice told me there were no emergency appointments. Then when I described my child’s condition (swelling), they managed to find an appointment.”*

**Child Urgent Call**

## Did you know?

Many dental practices offer urgent dental appointments and will provide care, if clinically necessary.

Patients can contact NHS 111, who can direct them to a local dental practice that may be able to provide urgent care.

*“The practice said they don’t do emergency appointments. They said emergencies are sent elsewhere.”*

**Child Urgent Call**



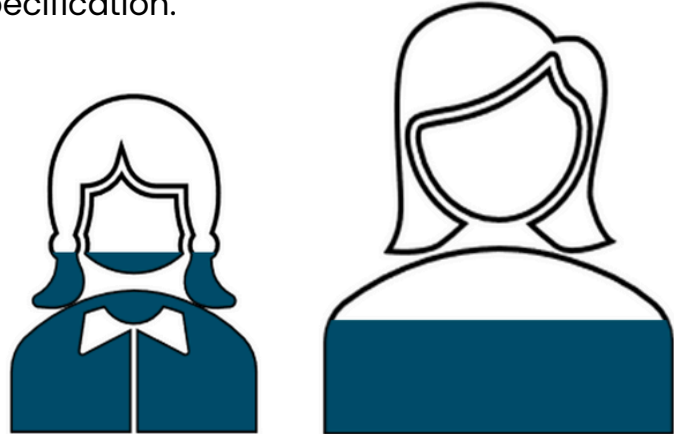
# Signposting and advice

*“The receptionist was so helpful and keen to help, she suggested giving Calpol. They can see my son for a one-off appointment.”*

**Child Urgent Call**

If a caller was not offered an urgent appointment, they asked the call handler for advice on what to do next.

NHS England commissioning guidance recommends that arrangements are made for the management and referral of callers with dental symptoms; as outlined in this specification.



**52% of urgent child enquiries were provided signposting\* if there was no appointment, compared to 35% of urgent adult enquiries.**

We found different advice was offered between practices. Advice included:



Call NHS 111



'Call around' other dental practices



Take pain killers



Make a private appointment

**Practices should be signposting patients to call NHS 111 if there are no appointments.**

## Calling around

The majority of practices that provided signposting or information, advised 'calling around' other practices to find an appointment over being signposted to NHS 111.

*\*see page 17 for terminology*

# Time to get an appointment

## When is the earliest available appointment?

The time between calling a practice and the date of the earliest appointment offered differed between routine and urgent scenarios.

Routine appointments had an 18 day wait longer, on average, than urgent appointments.

*"They offered an appointment for the next day and gave a choice of morning, afternoon or late, to fit in with work."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

*"The practice offered a private appointment the next day for £50."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

**Some practices offered an earlier appointment if the patient booked a private appointment.**



This suggests practices across Dudley borough prioritise NHS care for those with the most urgent need.

Whilst this ensures care is available for those who need it most, it could result in a lack of preventative dental care.

# Paying to be seen

*"The dental practice had no NHS spaces, they were at capacity, but they could see me privately."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

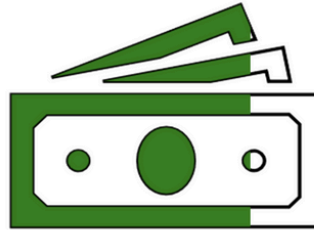
*"If seen privately, I could have an appointment for 5pm the next day at a cost of £150, including x-rays and fillings."*

**Adult Urgent Call**



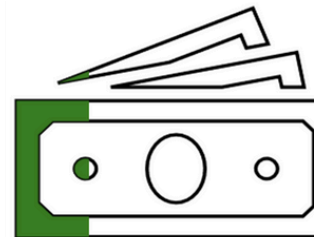
**If there were no NHS appointments available, callers asked if they could be seen privately.**

Practices were more likely to offer private appointment for routine enquiries than urgent enquiries.



**75%** of practices offered a private routine appointment

*\*when there were no NHS routine appointments available.*



**25%** of practices offered a private urgent appointment

*\*when there were no NHS urgent appointments available.*

This suggests that practices prioritise available NHS appointments for urgent enquiries and allocate appointments based on clinical need.

The increased availability of private routine appointments compared to NHS routine appointments displays a disparity in the availability of dental care between those who can afford to pay privately and those who cannot afford it.

**Some practices had conditions on seeing patients for NHS treatment.**

*"The practice said they are not taking adult NHS patients. They will see a child on the NHS if an adult pays privately. They will not see a child on the NHS without a private paying adult."*

**Routine call**

## **Did you know?**

There should be no conditions on an adult being seen privately to enable a child to access NHS care, if the practice has capacity.

# Phone experience

*"Very friendly and helpful."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

*"Receptionist was dismissive, persisted in saying I should call my old dentist."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

## Answer machine

Some practices used an answer machine for missed calls. Other practices would use an answer machine to screen calls and provide information. This information was not recorded by all callers so exact figures are not available.

## Customer service

The customer service provided by the call handler differed between practices. The experience may have depended on external factors such as how busy the practice was on the day.

*"The receptionist seemed stressed and said the phrase 'clinical capacity' three times."*

**Adult Urgent Call**

**The overwhelming feedback from callers was that call handlers were helpful and friendly in dealing with enquiries.**

*"The receptionist was so helpful and keen to help, she suggested giving Calpol. They can see my son for a one-off appointment."*

**Child Urgent Call**



# Finding information



## NHS dentists in Dudley

To begin this piece of work, we attempted to locate a comprehensive list of all dental practices offering NHS treatment in Dudley borough.

We found there was not a list of dental practices offering NHS treatment freely available to the public.

## Up-to-date information

Throughout the research, callers noted that the availability of appointments at some dental practices, did not match the information listed on the NHS website.

Some dental practices were only offering urgent NHS appointments, which was not reflected on the NHS website.

## Phone calls as a barrier to access

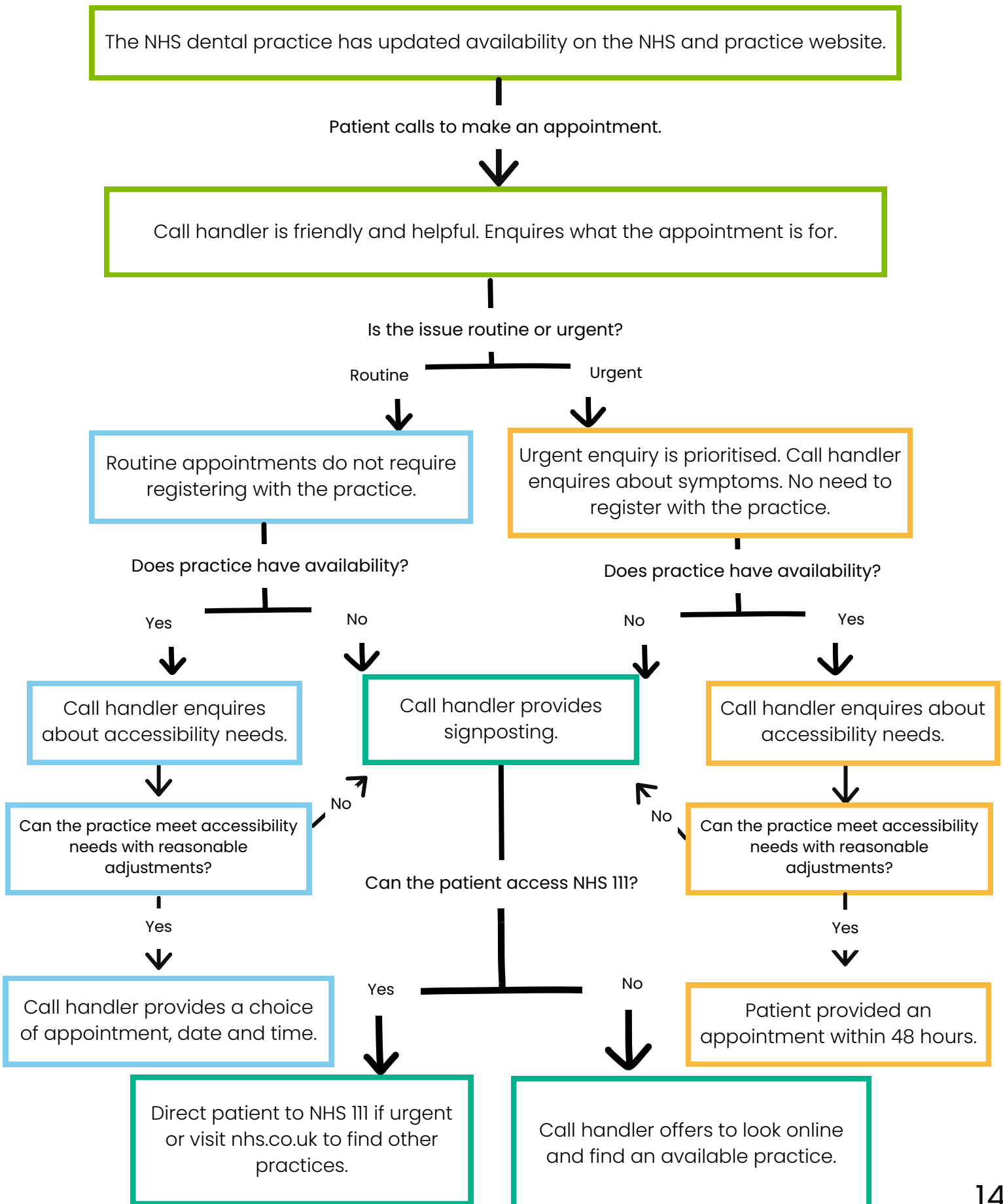
Overall, we discovered that the process of finding NHS dental treatment primarily relies on a patient making multiple phone calls.

This process could present a barrier to people who struggle to make phone calls including those who:

- Are d/Deaf
- Stammer
- Have anxiety disorders
- Are experiencing financial hardship
- Have demanding work or caring commitments

# What good looks like

We have developed a proposed best practice process for handling NHS dental enquiries. We recommend that clinical partners adopt and adapt a similar process, sharing it widely to promote a consistent and high standard of access to dental care across the Dudley borough.





# Recommendations

## ✓ Provide updated information online

- Maintain up-to-date availability on the NHS and practice websites
- All dental service providers must maintain an up to date entry on the NHS.uk website
- Develop and distribute a comprehensive list of NHS dental service providers in Dudley borough

## ✓ Train call handlers

- Ensure call handlers are equipped to provide signposting to NHS 111
- Maintain a professional curiosity when talking to patients:
  - Enquire about dental condition
  - Enquire about accessibility needs
  - Have an empathetic approach

## ✓ Clarity on services

- Clearly state, both online and in practice, what patients can expect from NHS dental services. Including:
  - Appointment times and days
  - Treatment charges

## ✓ Improve accessibility with online services

- Stakeholders should consider providing comprehensive information on local dental services in an accessible format
- Explore opportunities to utilise the NHS app for dental services

## ✓ Provide more NHS appointments

- Explore ways to provide more dental appointments on the NHS

## Recommending further research

This mystery shopper exercise has raised further questions regarding access to NHS dental services across Dudley. Healthwatch Dudley support further research into the following areas:

- Does the availability of NHS appointments published online reflect current, real-world availability?
- Does the availability of NHS appointments differ at different times of the year?
- What is local people's knowledge of: NHS dental practices, their rights to treatment, registration with dental practices, NHS 111 service and where to find information.

If you would like to explore further research opportunities with Healthwatch Dudley, please contact us at [hello@healthwatchdudley.co.uk](mailto:hello@healthwatchdudley.co.uk).

# Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Dudley would like to thank Dudley Council's Children and Young Peoples Public Health Team who committed to helping us develop this piece of work and for conducting calls.

Thank you also to the Healthwatch Dudley volunteers who gave their time to conduct calls and complete data entry.

Thank you to the NHS Consultant in Dental Public Health who provided invaluable clinical knowledge and provided training to staff and volunteers.

Finally, thank you to the people of Dudley borough who continue to share their experiences of health and social care services.



**Thank you for undertaking this piece of work. Commissioners value all feedback on services.**

We will be discussing the contents with local dentists to make them aware of this feedback and to ensure access to accurate information is available. We will continue to work to dispel the myth of registration, and to ask providers to be clear on people's rights to NHS services and the relationship with the private offer.

It is pleasing to read that urgent care is seen as a priority for access. Though we acknowledge there is more work to be done including on access to routine care.

Whilst we acknowledge the improvements that need to be made, it must be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had a serious impact on access to dental services, with care still recovering to pre-pandemic levels.

**Tracy Harvey, Senior Commissioning Manager, Primary Care Commissioning Team, West Midlands Integrated Care Boards**

## References

NHS England (2024) GP Patient Survey Dental Statistics; January to March 2024, England. *NHS England* [Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/2024/07/11/gp-patient-survey-dental-statistics-january-to-march-2024-england/>] Accessed 17 January 2025

Healthwatch England (2024) Access to NHS dentistry 2024 - findings. *Healthwatch* [Available at: <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/report/2024-11-20/access-nhs-dentistry-2024-findings>] Accessed 17 January 2025

## Limitations

We regularly undergo a rigorous assessment process to ensure our work is of a high quality. However, we acknowledge the following limitations to this work and are open to exploring future engagement or collaboration:

- We were unable to make contact with all practices in all scenarios. (Only one practice did not answer the phone on any attempt.)
- Some data recording was subjective e.g. what callers thought of the phone experience.
- The time of day or year that calls were made may have had an impact on appointment availability. We would recommend repeating the exercise at an alternative time of year.

## Note

Comments may have been edited for clarity and conciseness.

## \*Terminology

**Caller:** The volunteer or staff member making a call to a practice.

**Call handler:** The person answering the phone. Often receptionists, we did not enquire about the role of the person answering the phone.

**Signposting:** Directing people to relevant information or services.



**Committed  
to quality**

Healthwatch Dudley is committed to providing a quality service, from how we collect data, to the information we provide. Every three years we perform an in-depth audit, in conjunction with Healthwatch England, to ensure we meet this high standard.

**If you would like this report in another language or format please contact us.**

**Healthwatch Dudley**

7 Albion Street

Brierley Hill

DY5 3EE

03000 111 001 (local rate)

[hello@healthwatchdudley.co.uk](mailto:hello@healthwatchdudley.co.uk)

[www.healthwatchdudley.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchdudley.co.uk)

@HWDudley