



Knowing the Drill:
Patient Views of High
Weald Dentists
and East Sussex
Emergency
Dental Services



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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Key Findings	4
Key Discussion Point	5
Healthwatch East Sussex Future Activities	5
Reviewing Dental Provision in the High Weald.....	6
Introduction	6
Background	6
What we did.....	7
Enter and View activity at High Street Dentists	8
Findings of the Enter and View activity	8
Patient Questionnaire	8
What people told us at dental practices	10
Practice Managers Questionnaire.....	11
Additional observations from Authorised Representatives.....	12
Mystery Shopping - Out-of-Hours (OOH) services at High Street Dental Practices.....	14
Mystery shopping Websites - High Street Dental Practices	15
Enter and View activity at Emergency Dental Service (EDS): Eastbourne, Lewes and Hastings ...	16
Key Findings of the Enter & View Activity at Emergency Dental Services.....	17
What patients at Emergency Dental Service told us.....	18
Mystery Shopping of Emergency Dental Services.....	19
Mystery Shopping - Out-of-Hours Telephone at Emergency Dental Services.....	20
Emergency Dental Service websites	21
Learning for future work.....	24
Confidentiality.....	24
Accessibility	24
Conclusions.....	26
Future Actions	28
Healthwatch East Sussex to take forward:	28
Acknowledgements	29
References & further reading	30
Appendix	31
High Weald Dental Practices & Emergency Dental Services (EDS).....	31
High Street Dentists - Patient questionnaire	32
High Street Dentists - Practice questionnaire	33
High Street Dentists 2019 - Out-of-Hours Voicemail.....	34
Mystery Shopping Checklist	34
High Street Dentists 2019 - Websites	35

Mystery Shopping Checklist35

Emergency Dental Service - Patient questionnaire36

Emergency Dental Service - Out of Hours Voicemail38

Mystery shopping checklist38

Emergency Dental Service - Websites39

Mystery shopping checklist.....39

Executive Summary

“Oral health is a key indicator of overall health, wellbeing and quality of life...”

“Social determinants have a strong impact on oral health”

(World Health Organisation)

NHS data shows that barely half (51.4%) the adult population of this country visit a dentist ([NHS dental statistics](#)). East Sussex attendance figures show a similar trend.

Inspired by these figures and the above quotes, we believe it useful to our local health and care services as well as the wider health economy, to understand patients’ experience and views of dental care provision.

In June 2019, we conducted a pilot project to engage with dental practices and their patients. Using our statutory powers to “Enter and View” providers of care regulated by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), we visited 7 high street NHS dentists in the High Weald area and all 3 Emergency Dental Service clinics covering East Sussex.

Prior to each Enter and View visit, a brief questionnaire was put to practice staff to obtain information regarding facilities and access at the practice premises.

At our visits, simple questionnaires were offered to patients to gather their views and experiences. Are they satisfied with their treatment? Do they feel informed about the cost? What are the views of patients using Emergency Dental Services?

To add depth and context, we also conducted mystery shopper observations of practice websites and out of hours phone messages. Feedback to providers on this activity will hopefully contribute towards improved engagement of patients and their access to timely and relevant information.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of patients, at both high street dentists and Emergency Dental Services, were very positive about the care they received.
- The findings of this report show that some practices could significantly improve their quality and accessibility of information. This may include:
 - The location and contact details of the nearest out of hours services.
 - Information, support and facilities for patients with access needs, as well as signposting to referral route for Special Care Dental Services.
 - More information NHS charges for treatment, especially about how to claim exemption.
 - Information, support and facilities are not consistently available to patients with access needs.



Key Discussion Point

Healthwatch East Sussex notes that Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection reports include in their Key Lines of Enquiry regarding the responsiveness of a provider, the following question:

“How is technology used to support timely access to care and treatment? Is the technology (including telephone systems and online/digital services) easy to use?”

The findings in this report could support practices towards achieving well in this aspect of the inspection process.

We therefore invite dental practices to review their websites and out of hours voice messages to include information to an agreed standard checklist as a way improving their patients access to appropriate care.



Healthwatch East Sussex Future Activities

At high street central practices, our contact was clearly only with people who are already engaged with their dental care. But what about the people in this county who are not engaged at all?

Moving forward, our general engagement activities will aim to encourage the public to feedback their experiences of dental care and to share their reasons why they may or may not access a dental service.

Reviewing Dental Provision in the High Weald

Introduction

Healthwatch is the independent champion created under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to gather and represent the views of the public relating to health and care. One of our statutory powers and responsibilities is to 'Enter and View' health and social care establishments and services, to seek the views and experiences of people receiving a service.

All providers of care which are regulated by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) have a statutory duty to allow Healthwatch Authorised Representatives to carry out these activities.

Dental care is one of the few NHS services which is payable at the point of use; the others being prescriptions, eye tests, and wigs/fabric supports.

This is the first time that Healthwatch East Sussex has undertaken Enter & View activities at dental practices. The aim of this work was to obtain the patient's view of dental care services, including their experience of accessing information and treatment both for routine appointments and out-of-hours emergency care.



The Dental Practice Enter & View activities formed part of our programme of Listening Tour engagement with the public in the High Weald area during June 2019.

East Sussex Hospitals Trust (ESHT) host the out-of-hours emergency dental care for the county via the Emergency Dental Service (EDS). There are three EDS clinics in the county located in Lewes, Eastbourne and Hastings. We conducted Enter & View activity at Eastbourne EDS in early August 2019. Enter and View activities at Lewes and Hastings EDS were conducted in December 2019.

Background

The area of East Sussex north of Heathfield to the county border with Kent is known as the High Weald. The main urban areas are the market towns of Crowborough and Heathfield, surrounded by farmland, narrow roads and small to medium sized villages such as Hartfield and Mayfield.

As a whole, the High Weald area scores relatively low on the Indices of Deprivation (www.eastsussexinfigures) but there are localised areas of deprivation within it, for example in Alderbrook south of Crowborough. This area, whilst showing a medium rating for employment (5th decile), shows its population as being most deprived (1st decile) for physical and financial access to housing and local services; very deprived (2nd decile) regarding education, skills and training; and significantly deprived (3rd decile) regarding the effect of low income on children. The ethnicity of residents in this ward is approximately 93% white British/northern Irish, which is comparable to the rest of Wealden, Lewes and Rother.

What we did

There are eleven dental practices offering NHS services in the study area, and a further 3, not included in this study, which offer only private care.

The high street dental practices chosen for Enter & View activity were selected in order to provide geographical spread and representation of both rural and more urban areas of High Weald. Independent practices and those which are part of a larger group were also evenly represented (4 of each).

The independent practices have lists of between 2,500-3,000 patients, while those which are part of a group have lists of between 5,500-10,000 patients. Six out of the seven participating practices were accepting new NHS patients at the time of the study.

The high street (primary dental care) dental practices selected were:

Heathfield

Heathfield Dental Practice (Colosseum Dental group)

Oak Lodge Dental Practice (Independent)

Crowborough

Crowborough Dental Clinic (Colosseum Dental group)

Mermaid Dental Care (Simply Bright group)

Ashdown Dental Practice (Independent) - declined to participate

Rural areas

Riverview Dental Centre, Forest Row (Dentistry For You group)

Mayfield Dental Centre (Independent)

Lantern House Dental Practice, Wadhurst (Independent)

Activities covered by the project were as follows:

- Enter & View activity at each dental practice (one practice declined to take part)
- Enter & View activity at Eastbourne Emergency Dental Service (EDS)
- Mystery shopping of dental practices and EDS out of hours voice message
- Mystery shopping of dental practice and EDS websites

Enter and View activity at High Street Dentists



The reception area at dental practices are often open plan, and patients do not usually wait long before being called into clinic. It is well known that many people feel some anxiety around visiting the dentist and so we aimed to minimise the element of surprise and burden of questions for patients. The patient questionnaire was therefore designed to be as short and unobtrusive as possible

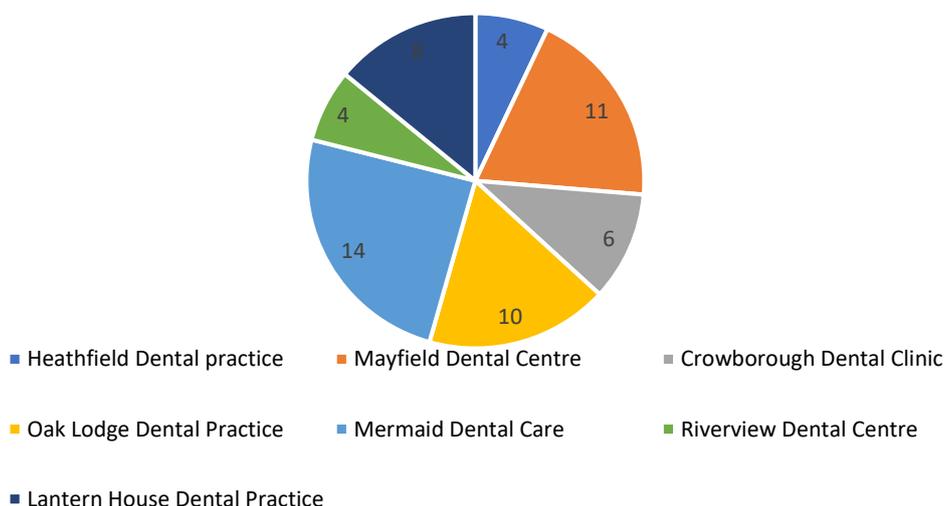
Almost all dental practices engaged positively with the Enter & View activities despite having no previous experience of the process. Our authorised representatives reported being warmly welcomed by staff. Only one practice (Ashdown Dental Clinic) declined to take part. This practice is closest to the area of Crowborough recorded as having the highest indices of deprivation so it was unfortunate to miss the opportunity of gathering views of patients who might live in that area.

Findings of the Enter and View activity

Patient Questionnaire

A total of 57 patients completed the questionnaire across the seven participating practices.

No. of patients responses at each dental practice

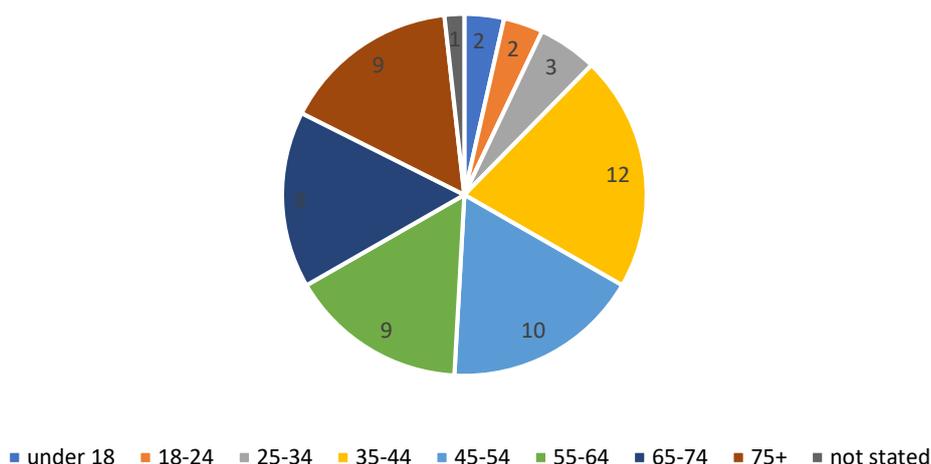


- Four out of five patients (51 or 81%) reported being advised to attend a check-up appointment at least once a year, and 42 (74%) patients said they see the same dentist at each visit.
- Just over half of patients (32 or 56%) understand what treatments are included in each NHS charging band. Of the 21 (37%) patients who do not understand the charging system,

9 (42%) could either not recall, or were unsure if charges had been explained clearly to them.

- Only one out of 57 respondents indicated that they were exempt from NHS charges for dental treatment.
- The vast majority of patients (49 or 86%) had treatment options clearly explained to them. Of the remaining 8 patients, 2 patients said that treatment options were not made clear to them, 3 said they had not needed any treatment, 1 was unsure and 2 did not answer the question.
- 3 out of 5 patients (35/61%) said they had received a copy of their treatment plan while 12 of 57 (21%) patients said they did not. 4 other patients indicated not applicable because treatment was not required; 4 patients were unsure, and 2 patients did not respond to the question.
- Just under half of patients (26 or 46%) regularly see a dental hygienist. Only 5 of those patients said they attended on a 6 monthly basis, while all others did not specify how often they attended. Of the remaining 30 (52%) of patients who said they did not regularly see a hygienist, one commented “It’s a bit pricey”. One respondent did not answer the question.
- An overwhelming majority of patients indicated (55 or 96%) that they were satisfied with their NHS treatment. Only two patients either stated N/A or did not answer the question, possibly because both identified themselves as also accessing private treatment.
- Patients aged 35 and over appear more likely to attend for dental appointments at the times we visited, with even representation (9 in each age group) occurring in age groups 55 to 64, 65 to 74 and 75+. 7 patients were under 35 years old.

Age Groups of patients attending high street dental practices



What people told us at dental practices



Although their questionnaire responses were overwhelmingly positive, all but 5 patients chose not to make additional comments and did not want to expand on their answers to our authorised representatives.

The waiting area in high street practices is usually in the same room as the reception desk, and although these areas are pleasant and welcoming, they are not conducive to patients verbally sharing their views about the service.

Patients were also seen very quickly following arrival, and so there was little time to complete the questionnaire before going into the clinic room. Three comments were made as follows:

“The kindest and most thoughtful dentist. Perfect for a nervous/anxious patient” Crowborough Dental Clinic

“Up to date has been a reliable and professional service”
Riverview Dental Centre

“Have been coming here for 3 years - very satisfied”
Lantern House Dental Practice

However, two comments suggest that patients may not have up to date information about what to do if they had an emergency.

“If I had emergency I would phone here or go to Hailsham clinic.”
Crowborough Dental Clinic

“If I had dental emergency, I would go to A&E after having painkillers, and would go [to regular dentist] the next day.”
Mayfield Dental Clinic

The Enter & View visits at high street practices provided an interesting snapshot of those who are engaged with their dental practice, including 4 new patients attending their practice for the first time. Some patients are so engaged with a particular dentist that they prefer to travel for an appointment rather than use their most local provision.

However, gathering feedback from existing patients at a dental practice provides no insight to those who are not engaged at all. Given the potential impact on the individual in terms of their health outcomes, it is important to hear from unengaged or disengaged patients their reasons for being so and explore what would need to change for them to access dental care. This may only be gathered away from dental practices, such as general Healthwatch activities in community settings or social media settings.

Practice Managers Questionnaire



All seven participating practice managers completed a short questionnaire which sought to capture information on the status and operation of their surgery.

Questions included the following:

Is your practice currently accepting NHS patients?

Six of the seven participating dental practices stated they were open to new NHS patients. One practice indicated that their NHS list is currently full.

Where are patients signposted to if the practice is full?

Four of the seven participating practices belong to groups (Colosseum, Simply Bright, Dentistry for You) and all stated they would signpost patients to the nearest practice within their member group. Mermaid Dental Practice (Simply Bright) and Crowborough Dental Clinic (Colosseum) also signpost patients to Dental Helpline.

Of the three independent practices, Oak Lodge, which is currently full, signposts patients to the Dental Helpline. Lantern House has not needed to close their list for 3 years and said they can accept all new patients. One practice indicated that patients were not signposted elsewhere if the practice was full.

Where does the practice refer to for out-of-hours/urgent dental care?

All seven practices cited out of hours provision within East Sussex mentioning at least 2 town locations. However, 3 of those practices named the Hailsham clinic which relocated to Eastbourne approximately 2 years prior to this study.

How does the practice support access to dental services for marginalised or socially excluded groups? (protected characteristics or low income).

The responses varied a great deal between practices in the amount of detail they provided. The practice response to this question did not always correlate to the information listed on their website. For example, one practice did not answer this question, but the access facilities listed on their website are more comprehensive than most, with provision advertised for wheelchair access, anxious patients, different languages and an option for domiciliary visits.

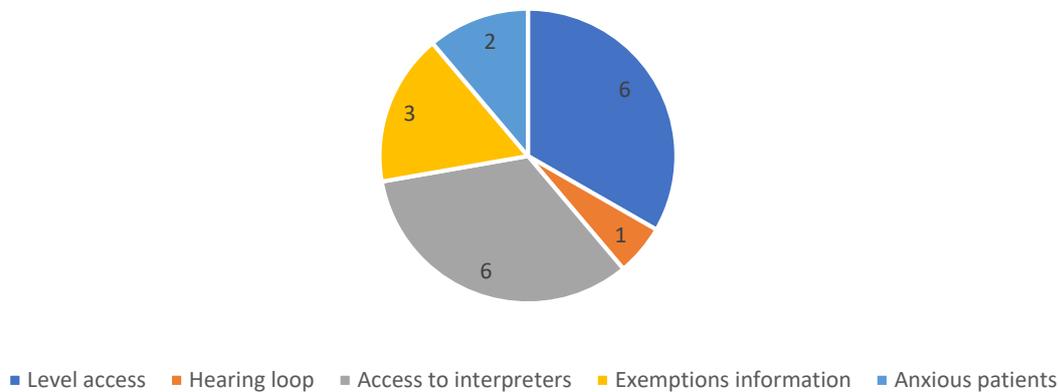
In contrast, the questionnaire response from another practice clearly showed knowledge and understanding of the needs of patients on low income, but the website lists only NHS charging bands, and options for dental payment plans. There was no information about entitlement to exemption from NHS charges or how to apply.

Six of the seven practices indicated that ground floor or wheelchair access was available, and how language access needs could be met, either by arranging interpreting services or by languages spoken by staff at the practice.

Only one practice, Oak Lodge, mentioned the Special Care Dental Service or domiciliary visit as a possible option for patients with disabilities. However, it is noted that the Special Care Dental Service can only be accessed via referral by health or social care professionals.

Heathfield Dental Practice indicated that a hearing loop was available. Lantern House and Riverview specifically mentioned support for anxious patients.

Access for disadvantaged patients



Three practices specifically stated that patients exempt from NHS charges attend the practice. Crowborough Dental Practice demonstrated detailed understanding of entitlements and how they support patients to claim.

Additional observations from Authorised Representatives

Confidentiality



At one practice, the authorised representatives observed an issue which could result in breaches of confidentiality. There was a partition wall between one treatment room and the waiting area which was not well soundproofed, making it possible to overhear conversations in the treatment room. The television/monitor in the waiting room was not in use, but a radio was playing near the reception area.

The authorised representatives thought perhaps background music could be played via the television which would mask conversations in the treatment room. This observation is not intended to single out one practice for criticism, as we realise that this might be a problem in many practices especially as some waiting rooms are very quiet.

Access

Heathfield Dental Practice was noted to have a hearing loop in place. We are not aware

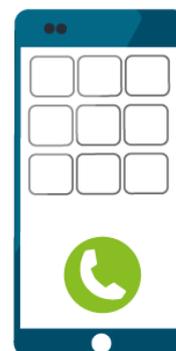
of other practices having a hearing loop because practice staff did not mention hearing access in the pre-visit questionnaire.

Crowborough Dental Clinic was noted to have good accessibility for wheelchairs, including toilet facilities. Oak Lodge was observed as a friendly environment with a small play area for young children which provided good example of family oriented dental care.

Mystery Shopping - Out-of-Hours (OOH) services at High Street Dental Practices

Phone calls were made to each of the eight selected dental practices during out-of-hours periods, and the practice voicemail was observed for the following information points:

- Number of rings to get through
- Volume & tone of message
- Opening hours
- Emergency signposting to NHS
- Location of EDS
- Contact number of EDS
- Private OOH options
- Option for patient to leave a voicemail



The emergency numbers provided via the voice messages were also tested, in order to check for the accuracy and content of information available to callers.

Mystery shopping out-of-hours services at high street dental practices

Inconsistency of information provided by dental practices

Only one practice (Oak Lodge) out of the eight engaged gave good quality information on all the enquiry items (see list above). Correct locations and phone numbers for all three Emergency Dental Service sites in East Sussex were provided, as well as information about their private emergency service (including what costs would be involved). Finally, the phone message voice quality was appropriately paced and friendly sounding, with clear phrasing and a reasonable volume.

The information provided by the other practices Out-Of-Hours/Emergency Dental Services contained varying degrees of accuracy, or consistency of signposting as follows:

- One practice provided no information. The message was “*All our staff are currently busy, please hold*” on a loop recording. An option to press #2 and leave a message was offered after 45 seconds of ringing tone.
- Two practices gave the correct phone number for Eastbourne Emergency Dental Service clinic, but said it was located in Hailsham.
- Two practices provided phone numbers for services other than direct Emergency Dental Service lines. These were:
 - Lewes Victoria Hospital general phone number which in turn, via an automated message, signposted the caller to the Lewes Emergency Dental

Service (EDS) number. This therefore required the caller to make 3 separate phone calls in order to reach the EDS.

- Dental Helpline, an 0300 number which is an automated service. It offers press button options (press 1 for Eastbourne, 2 for Hastings etc). This line operates during weekday business hours and closes at 6pm.
- 2 practices gave NHS111 as a contact for Out-Of-Hours services, but no other information about Emergency Dental Service locations or access.
- None of the East Sussex High Weald dentists situated near the county border provided any information in their phone messages about Kent or West Sussex EDS for patients who might live in the neighbouring county.

Mystery shopping Websites - High Street Dental Practices

We mystery shopped the websites of all eight dental practices approached for the Enter & View activities. A simple checklist was prepared and the number of “clicks to find” each piece of information was recorded.

We looked for information about opening times, appointment booking options, charging and exemptions, out of hours/urgent care signposting, disabled access, provision for people who are anxious, and language interpretation/translation facilities.

Key Findings

- Inconsistency of information available to patients via practice websites
- No information about how to access Special Care Dental Service for patients with disabilities or other qualifying needs. ([Special Care Dental Service eligibility](#))

The websites of the 4 independent practices were small and easy to navigate because of their relevance to one individual clinic location. However, they varied a great deal in the amount of information available to view. One practice (Oak Lodge) provided the most comprehensive information to our enquiry points, while another did not include opening times, NHS charging procedures, or any information about accessibility of the building. Likewise, although one website provided opening times, no information was provided about NHS charges, exemptions or access to the practice.

The websites of 4 practices which belong to larger groups, contained more consistent information about opening times and NHS availability. However, they are more cumbersome to navigate, by requiring the user to search within the website for their nearest practice.

Simply Bright and Dentistry for You were the easiest group practices to search and provide a simple list of their practices, together with postcode and telephone numbers. Another group provides a map of practices, but the pins are not interactive. The user therefore has to provide their home postcode (not town) in the search bar in order to find the contact details of their nearest practice.

In summary, the 8 websites we visited were difficult to compare with each other because the information we searched for was not consistently displayed, or in some cases, not displayed at all.

Enter and View activity at Emergency Dental

Service (EDS): Eastbourne, Lewes and Hastings



Emergency Dental Services (EDS) are hosted by East Sussex Healthcare Trust (ESHT) at three locations: Eastbourne, Hastings and Lewes.

Healthwatch East Sussex visited Eastbourne EDS in July/August, four to six weeks after the end of High Weald Listening Tour. Lewes and Hastings EDS clinics were visited in November and December 2019.

Working in partnership with the Head of Community Dental Services, a detailed preparation of both staff and Healthwatch authorised representatives was completed prior to conducting the Enter and View activity. This was because out-of-hours services present additional challenges to staff and patients than in non-urgent services. They operate on a bare minimum number of staff, and often involve caring for patients and families who are likely to be more than usually anxious and distressed.

Patients must be experiencing symptoms such as infection, or significant swelling, in order to reach the criteria for an appointment with the Emergency Dental Service. Their eligibility for the service is assessed when the patient rings to request an appointment. Walk in appointment requests are not permitted and the entrances to clinic buildings are controlled by buzzer intercom where patients identify themselves on arrival.

Emergency Dental Service clinics in East Sussex have a live telephone line between 6:30pm-10:30pm with clinical appointments between 7:00pm -9:00pm. A telephone triage takes place by suitably trained staff to allocate clinical appointments to those most in need. As well as booking treatment appointments the triage contact provides advice, self-help or signposts patients to alternative care throughout the session. The number of patients accessing the service varies according to demand, treatment provided and the time spent giving advice.

Healthwatch East Sussex made six visits to Eastbourne EDS over a fortnight. Two weekday evening visits and one weekend visit were completed each week. Each clinic at Hastings and Lewes was visited twice; one weekday evening and one day at the weekend. During these periods we engaged with a total of 50 patients; 36 in Eastbourne, 5 in Lewes, and 9 in Hastings.

For the Enter and View visits, a room was made available for patients and authorised representatives to complete the survey in a more confidential setting. However, almost without exception, patients opted to stay in the waiting area to complete the form. In Eastbourne, authorised representatives and staff were surprised to experience patients chatting to them and fellow patients about the questionnaire. Patients at Eastbourne commented that doing this helped them feel more relaxed and supported.

As all the EDS clinics are located in the southernmost parts of East Sussex, we realised beforehand that residents in the county could have quite a journey to reach a clinic. For example:

- Crowborough to Lewes is 17+ miles; 30 minutes by car or 75 minutes by bus.
- Mayfield to Eastbourne is 20 miles; 30 minutes by car or a 2.5 hour journey via 3 buses and a 20 minute walk.
- Burwash to Hastings or Eastbourne is 15-20 miles; 30 minutes by car, but inaccessible by public transport out of usual business hours, except via taxi.

Key Findings of the Enter & View Activity at Emergency Dental Services



- **Satisfaction with the service**

47 of the 50 (94%) respondents indicated that their dental problem had been dealt with appropriately. This result is supported by very positive comments provided by patients about both the treatment and the quality of staff at all three sites. Only one respondent said that their problem had not been dealt with appropriately but did not specify what treatment they thought should have been provided. Two people declined to answer the question as they were either preoccupied with accompanying family members or

in a hurry to leave the premises.

It is noticeable from the survey and discussions that many patients attending Emergency Dental Clinics in East Sussex travel a long way to do so, especially those living in the northern parts of the county.

Access to an NHS Dentist

Approximately three-quarters of respondents (36 out of 50 or 72%) indicated that they have access to a regular NHS dentist. However, when those same patients were asked about their last planned appointment, the responses varied a great deal. This could suggest ambiguity as to how the phrase “access to a regular NHS dentist” is interpreted by patients.

- Approximately a third of those attending EDS clinics (16 of 50 or 32%) had not attended a planned appointment with their dentist for a year or more. 12 of the individuals responding in this way indicated that they either did not know when they last had a planned appointment or that they had not attended for least 2 years.
- Two out of five patients attending EDS (21 of 50 or 42%) indicated that they do not currently have planned appointments with a high street dentist.
 - 11 patients identified their reason for not attending regularly was to do with anxiety about dental appointments.
 - Two patients said that cost was a reason for not attending.
 - Two patients indicated that they had difficulty registering with a regular dentist.
 - Two patients said their reasons for not attending were “stupidity” and “just rubbish at follow up”.

- Of the 36 patients we spoke to at Eastbourne, fewer than a quarter (8 or 22%) had travelled more than 15 miles to reach Eastbourne EDS, but one patient had travelled 32 miles from Pembury, Kent.
- Patients at Lewes and Hastings generally lived relatively close to the Clinic. The longest journey to Hastings was 12 miles from Hawkhurst, Kent; and to Lewes, the longest journey was 16 miles from Eastbourne.

What patients at Emergency Dental Service told us

As expected, the patients we met at all EDS clinics had symptoms of pain and discomfort, but the vast majority expressed relief and satisfaction at the care they received.

A total of 44 comments were made in the free text sections of the questionnaires and a selection of these is set out below. Some comments were clinically explicit and not relevant to their opinion of the service, whilst some patients chose not to comment.

Eastbourne Emergency Dental Service

At Eastbourne, 18 out of 22 (82%) relevant comments expressed satisfaction with the service. Comments included praise for the quality of treatment, kindness and efficiency of all clinic staff.

Four comments expressed dissatisfaction. Two comments related to waiting an hour for their phone call to be answered; One comment suggested that EDS is not as responsive as hospital A&E to people in pain, and one comment stated that their problem had not been dealt with appropriately.

Examples of patients' positive comments:

“So glad it was dealt with quickly and so efficiently”

“Excellent service”

“A pleasant experience because all the staff were so nice”

“All absolutely brilliant”

“Did all they could”

“Very friendly, helpful staff, good service”

“Really efficient”

Examples of patients' critical comments:

“Not properly dealt with - no solution”

“Phoned Lewes, did not get any joy. Phoned here yesterday. It rang for an hour. Eventually told to ring back at the correct time.”

Lewes Emergency Dental Service

At Lewes, all six relevant comments expressed high satisfaction with the service. Examples included:

“Fab service, was seen within 20 mins of phoning. Cannot fault”

“Pleased how quickly I got an appointment. Everyone was very kind”.

“Best £22 ever spent. Lovely here. Think they are brilliant”

Hastings Emergency Dental Service

At Hastings, 2 of 3 relevant comments expressed satisfaction with the service. The other comment concerned dental charges. The patient understood from internet sources that they should not be charged twice for the same dental problem.

“Good job well done, sensitive to [my] pain”

“Very good dentist and nurse”

“Query being charged a second time for the same dental problem. Suggested on the internet it states this should not be so”

Healthwatch authorised representatives reported that at all sites they were not only themselves made to feel welcome, but that they observed the same warm approach provided to the patients.

The authorised representatives observed that the phone lines remained busy with triage and advice calls for the full duration of the clinics attended in Eastbourne and Hastings.

Mystery Shopping of Emergency Dental Services

Using adapted similar checklists to that of the high street dental practices, we also ‘mystery shopped’ the Emergency Dental Service telephone messages and websites for East Sussex, Kent, and West Sussex. We included Kent and West Sussex in this activity as residents in the High Weald area are very close to the county borders and so may try to access services in neighbouring counties.

Mystery Shopping - Out-of-Hours Telephone at Emergency Dental Services

Getting an appointment

Information about EDS services in East Sussex was more clearly delivered and in a more sequential fashion when compared to that provided in neighbouring Kent and West Sussex. East Sussex provided information about brief gateway criteria, opening times and clinic locations.



East Sussex also included information about their provision of telephone advice if all appointments were booked and mentioned the phone queuing system. We thought this would be especially useful to manage patients' expectations and anxiety around how long they might wait for their call to be answered.

West Sussex provided clear and brief information about opening hours and alternative West Sussex locations. Callers were also signposted to either Dental Helpline or NHS 111. No information about charging procedures or eligibility criteria was given.

Kent provided information about telephone triage to establish eligibility of patient for an appointment. The location and address of the clinic is only provided when the patient has been accepted for an emergency appointment. Information was provided about charges and that emergency treatment was given to ease symptoms until patients could see their usual dentist. Callers were signposted to Dental Helpline, but information about NHS 111 was not given.

All three Emergency Dental Services phone messages clearly stated that clinic appointments could only be made by phone and that walk in presentation was not permitted. Given that there are limited number of emergency appointment slots each day there is a pressing need to triage and allocate appointments accurately according to criteria.

Members of the public can sometimes express challenging behaviour, and so triage by phone call only can help to reduce the risk of out of hours staff being vulnerable to this.

However, it is important to note that people on very low incomes, such as those in emergency accommodation, cannot necessarily access a phone, and so face an immediate barrier to accessing emergency dental advice even before distance and travel costs are considered.

Charging procedure and rates

East Sussex clearly stated that charges were applicable, details of how to pay, and a reminder to bring any proof of exemption to the clinic. West Sussex provided no information about charging procedures, whereas Kent provided similar information to that of East Sussex.

Signposting to other services

East Sussex signposted patients to Dental helpline (the number was repeated twice at a steady pace). However, NHS 111 was not mentioned in the message as an option for patients to access advice about their symptoms when EDS is closed. Both Kent and West Sussex out-of-hours telephone messages signposted callers to Dental helpline. West Sussex was the only service which signposted callers to NHS 111.

Emergency Dental Service websites

We used the same search term via Google for each county as appropriate:



“Emergency NHS Dentist East Sussex/West Sussex/Kent”

All were reached with one click, with telephone numbers and opening hours on clearly on view.

The key variations observed between the three websites relate to the information provided about the following:

Location and addresses of Emergency Dental Service clinics

East Sussex and Kent provided town locations, but not the address of the clinic. West Sussex provided location, address and parking information.

To minimise the number of people arriving at EDS without an appointment, the clinic address is not available online. There is no staff capacity to deal with unscheduled patients and it is acknowledged that, given the resources available, it is an effective way of managing this issue. However, it can present an additional barrier to patients who are reliant on public transport and struggling on low income. Having reached the clinical criteria and obtained an appointment via phone triage, the patient can only then plan their public transport route to reach their appointment. If it becomes clear that the journey is unfeasible in the time available, they might then be unable to phone the clinic in time for their appointment slot to be adjusted or allocated to someone else.

For example, a public transport journey from Seaford to Eastbourne town centre is one bus ride taking approximately 30 minutes; but would involve another 35 minute bus ride to reach the clinic located in the suburb of Shinewater.

Opening times

East Sussex and West Sussex provided phone line opening times for both weekday and weekends, and together with clinic session times. It is made clear that the phone lines remain open for verbal advice beyond the clinic session. Kent provided phone line opening times but did not specify clinic session times.

Clinical and residential eligibility criteria

East Sussex and Kent both state that all patients will be triaged/assessed by phone and offered an appointment for temporary urgent treatment if they meet the criteria. East Sussex does not list clinical eligibility criteria, while Kent lists four. West Sussex does not specifically mention telephone triage/assessment or eligibility criteria, but lists the treatments available at EDS if symptoms require prompt attention from a dentist.

East and West Sussex both state that the service is open to residents of each county only. However, the results from our patient questionnaires in East Sussex show that some patients from out of county access the service. East Sussex EDS recognise the need for holiday makers and cross border flexibility which is reflected in the evidence shown in this report. **Kent** does not specify residential criteria but does provide detailed information about EDS in neighbouring areas. This information could be especially useful to all patients living near border areas depending on how strictly residential criteria are applied.

Information about EDS in neighbouring areas and who to contact when EDS is closed. **East Sussex** does not provide contact details for EDS in neighbouring areas. Contact details for Dental Helpline are provided, but NHS 111 is not.

It should be noted that Dental Helpline is only open on weekdays during office hours, and their recorded options direct the caller back to the EDS clinic line or to NHS 111.

West Sussex does not provide contact details for EDS in neighbouring areas. Contact details for both Dental Helpline and NHS 111 are provided.

Kent provided contact details for EDS in neighbouring areas, including Brighton/Hove. Kent EDS is accessed via “local Kent DentaLine service” which is different to the Dental Helpline service listed on East and West Sussex sites. However, when closed, Kent DentaLine recorded message directs caller to the Dental Helpline. NHS 111 is listed as a signpost for London residents but it is not clearly stated as an option for all patients regardless of where they live.

None of the EDS websites provided information about disability access to the service.

Equalities information for all services

- Almost all patients accessing dental practices and EDS at the times we visited identified themselves as White British and in age groups of 35 and over.
- At the seven participating high street dental practices, 66% of patients who completed the equalities monitoring form were women, while at EDS, the proportion of women was 60% to 40% men.
- Only one respondent identified themselves as exempt from NHS charges. We have no information about the exemption status of patients accessing EDS.
- None of the high street practices provided any information about how patients with disabilities could request access to the Special Care Dental Service. This service is hosted by East Sussex Healthcare Trust (ESHT) and accessed via referral from a health or social care professional. Neither East or West Sussex EDS provided information about Special Care Dental Service. The Special Care service



is listed separately on the ESHT website, but there is no link to it via the EDS page.

- Special Care Dentistry was included in the Kent website along with the other dental services, including Emergency Dental Service hosted by the Trust.

Learning for future work

Confidentiality

We hoped to include case studies but were unable to obtain these due to the surgery waiting room environment and facilities; as well as a lack of time to engage sufficiently with the patient.

Many Dental practices have little or no confidential space apart from the clinic room itself and due to rapid throughput of patients there was no time to interview patients in more detail as well as completing the brief Enter and View questionnaire with them.

There is therefore also a possibility of patient confidentiality being compromised day to day in reception/waiting areas in surgeries, especially if a patient needs support to complete a registration form or must provide further information about themselves to reception staff.

Future questionnaires could include a prompt to ask patients if they would be willing to take part in a case study at another time such as via an arranged phone call with the authorised representative they met at the surgery.

It is noted with thanks that all EDS sites offered a separate room for authorised representatives and patients to complete the questionnaire.



Accessibility

Disabilities

Although the questionnaire sent to practice managers asked about facilities for access requirements, authorised representatives were not specifically briefed to observe these when visiting. Future Enter and View activities will include a checklist of observations for wheelchair and hearing access.



Engagement with Patients

Patients waiting for appointments at their usual surgery are clearly engaged with their dental practice and have chosen to attend for mostly routine care and treatment. Enter and View activities in high street dentists therefore provide no information about people who are not engaged with NHS dental services, and why they are not.

Insight to this could therefore be gained via our more general engagement activities, by including prompts to elicit how and when people engage with dental care and feedback as to why others do not.

Ways of doing this could include:

- Engagement with groups likely to experience health inequalities because of barriers such as cost, physical or language/cultural access (Cultural/ethnicity related groups, disability groups, Job centre, foodbank, social housing).

- Engagement with families about why they do not access dental care for their children, and what they think would enable them to do so.

The questionnaire did not ask any specific questions regarding children. Two teenaged patients under 18 completed the survey, but no children of primary school age were observed attending appointments at any of the high street dental practices. Two children in this age group were noted to have appointments at the Emergency Dental Service clinics in Eastbourne and Hastings.

On the basis of the statistics below, there is clearly scope for future Healthwatch activity to explore the barriers experienced by families with children to engagement with dental care:

- 2 in 5 children did not visit NHS dentist in 2017-18¹
- 26,000 children were admitted to hospital because of tooth decay (2017-18)²
- Treatment for tooth decay is most common reason for child admission to hospital³

Engagement with Practice staff

It is fairly common for health and care staff to be unfamiliar with Healthwatch and its functions; but once informed in more detail, most providers realise their statutory duties and the value of engaging with the organisation.

However, despite at least two phone discussions followed up with supporting written information about the role and legal powers of Healthwatch, one dental practice refused to engage and allow us to visit.

The learning from this is that prior to Enter and View activities to dental practices in the county, we will try to ensure that each practice/service manager has received Healthwatch feedback forms/packs together with individual introductory communication at least 3 months in advance of our proposed visit.

However, it is noted that a provider of regulated health or care services has a responsibility to be aware of their legal duties, which include the obligation to allow Healthwatch to carry out its functions. If providers do not follow this obligation, Healthwatch can escalate this to the Care Quality Commission (CQC) as it could indicate an issue regarding standards of care provided at the premises.

Future Enter and View activities would include more detailed observation sheets to use when visiting practices and would include items or notices which would be useful to patients e.g. NHS charging bands, exemptions information, out-of-hours provision, disabled access and child friendly facilities.

¹ [Royal College of Surgeons Child dental attendance 2018](#)

² [Royal College of Surgeons child hospital admission for tooth decay 2018](#)

³ [Public Health England Child Oral Health 2019](#)

Questions we could ask in the future

Moving forwards there are a range of avenues that Healthwatch could explore in relation to the revision and take-up of dental services. This includes:

- How did you choose your current dentist?
- What helped you decide who to choose?
- What do you think of the practice website or phone contact?
- What is it about this dental practice that works well for you? (What keeps you coming back?)
- What would you do if you had a dental emergency out-of-hours?
- Have you needed to contact Emergency Dental services in the last 12months? (and what happened?)
- Do you know where your nearest Emergency Dental Service is?
- How would you get there?
- We would ask EDS clinics if they are able to find out whether or not patients have a current dental record with a high street dentist.
- Elicit reasons why people don't visit the dentist, such as anxiety, cost, distance, access.



Conclusions

Clear and consistent information provided by high street practices could contribute to patients engaging with and accessing appropriate services more easily. For example, facilitating better access to exemption status, or more encouragement and support for anxious patients in engaging with services. This may facilitate regular attendance and better take-up which could reduce the need for invasive treatments or attendance at Emergency Dental Services.

The results of our engagement with patients at Emergency Dental Services appears to suggest that most of them are engaged in some way with a high street dentist. However, subsequent questions about their attendance of planned appointments suggests that many patients attending Emergency Dental Services are not regularly attending check-ups.

It is perhaps worth considering whether, in addition to promoting support available to patients who are anxious, or on low income, some kind of incentive, such as a loyalty scheme could help some patients to attend regularly. If this was successful, it could have potential for reducing pressure on enquiries and attendance at both Emergency Dental Services and Hospital Emergency Departments.

Healthwatch would be open to exploring opportunities with relevant organisations to engage public views about the possibility of a cost effective incentive scheme. For example, if patients are more likely to attend regularly if they book their next appointment at the time of their visit, a simple “goody bag” reward for doing so, could be broached with oral care product companies. This could be an effective incentive to patients who admit to “being rubbish at follow up” (p18 of this report)

Whilst information about the population and their use of NHS dental services are collected by statutory data collection, Healthwatch specialises in gathering the views of patients and the wider public about their health and care experiences. Healthwatch is therefore well placed to explore the reasons and barriers expressed by the general public around engagement, or non-engagement with dental services, and importantly, what might help them engage in the future.

There could also be an opportunity to develop patient feedback into a wider conversation with them around taking responsibility for one’s own health by engaging with whatever preventative health advice or services are available, such as reducing sugar consumption, and routine health or dental checks.

Future Actions

Healthwatch East Sussex notes that the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) Key Lines of Enquiry regarding the responsiveness of a provider, contains the following question:

“How is technology used to support timely access to care and treatment? Is the technology (including telephone systems and online/digital services) easy to use?”

The findings of this report show that some practices could significantly improve their quality and accessibility of information. For example:

- Location and contact details of the nearest out of hours services
- Accessibility of premises
- NHS charges, including information about claiming exemption of all NHS charges.

We therefore invite dental practices to review their websites and out of hours voice messages to include information according to an agreed standard checklist as a way improving their patients access to appropriate care. Doing this could contribute towards practices achieving well in this aspect of the inspection process.

We also invite dental practices to consider the layout and soundproofing of both reception/waiting areas and clinic rooms in order to preserve dignity and confidentiality of the patient. This is especially relevant to patients who are hard of hearing and whose personal information may be inadvertently shared because of the need for higher volume speech.

Healthwatch East Sussex to take forward:

- Include questions regarding access to and experience of dental services in all HWES engagement activities with particular focus on reasons for not attending a dentist, and reasons for choice of dentist. This could include some reflective questions about how the public sees their individual responsibility for looking after their health.
- Build relationship with the Local Dental Network with special regard to role of dental providers in Primary Care Networks and patients access to and experience of dental care.
- Evaluate and improve mystery shopping checklist for use in all Enter and View Activities. Websites are increasingly the patient's first experience of a service, particularly for people new to an area.
- Engage with patient groups who could be eligible for Special Care Dental Service and consider Enter and View activities at Special Care Dental Service sites.
- Work with neighbouring Healthwatch in Kent and West Sussex to find out about East Sussex patients' reasons for and experience of accessing dental services in Kent.

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- Mermaid Dental Centre
- Oak Lodge Dental Practice, Heathfield
- Riverview Dental Practice, Forest Row
- Clinical and managerial staff at the Emergency Dental Services (EDS) in Eastbourne, Lewes and Hastings
- Healthwatch Authorised Representatives

References & further reading

Percentage of population seen by dentist by CCG (table4b)

[NHS Dental Statistics for England-2016-17#key-facts](#)

[NHS Health risks of gum disease](#)

[World Health Organisation fact-sheets - oral-health](#)

[Nuffield Trust - Root Causes: Quality-and-inequality-in-dental-health](#)

[CQC What you should expect from your dental practice](#)

[CQC assessment framework](#) (revised 2015), includes this substantive change in Responsive section of the Key Lines of Enquiry:

“How is technology used to support timely access to care and treatment? Is the technology (including telephone systems and online/digital services) easy to use?”

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

[Eastsussex JSNA Equality-Profile-HWLH-CCG-Jan-2018](#)

[GP Dental Survey 2019](#)

[Wealden District Council - About the Wealden area](#)

Exemptions for people on low income

[NHS Help with health costs - low income scheme](#)

Form HC1 (application for exemption certificate)

[NHS form HC1 application for exemption](#) (20 pages)

Special Care Dental Care East Sussex

<https://www.esht.nhs.uk/service/special-care-dental-service/>

Appendix

High Weald Dental Practices & Emergency Dental Services (EDS)

Ashdown Dental (Crowborough/Jarvis Brook) 01892 610222

<https://ashdowndentalpractice.co.uk/>

Crowborough Dental Practice, 01892 653935

<https://www.colosseumdental.co.uk/practices/crowborough-dental-clinic>

Heathfield Dental Clinic, 102 High Street Heathfield, 01435 867007

<https://www.colosseumdental.co.uk/practices/heathfield-dental-clinic>

Lantern House Dental Practice, Wadhurst, 01892 782629

<https://lanterndental.co.uk/>

Mayfield Dental Centre, 01435 873659

<http://www.mayfielddentalcentre.com/>

Mermaid Dental Care, 01892 661800

<https://www.simplybright.co.uk/branches/mermaid-dental-clinic>

Oak Lodge, Heathfield, 01435 862685

<https://oaklodge-dental.co.uk/>

Riverview Dental Clinic, Forest Row, 01342 823 004 or 0800 158 8000

<https://www.dentistryforyou.co.uk/>

Emergency Dental Service, Eastbourne, 01323 449170

<https://www.esht.nhs.uk/service/emergency-dental-service/>

Emergency Dental Service, Hastings, 01424 850 792

<https://www.esht.nhs.uk/service/emergency-dental-service/>

Emergency Dental Service, Lewes, 01273 486444

<https://www.esht.nhs.uk/service/emergency-dental-service/>

High Street Dentists - Patient questionnaire

Enter & View Questions Dental Practices 2019

1. Are you an NHS patient? Yes No
2. Are you invited to attend check ups 6 monthly 12 monthly Other (please state)
3. Do you see the same dentist at each visit? Yes No
- 4a. Are you aware of what is included in NHS charging bands? Yes No
- 4b. If No Is it explained clearly to you?
5. Are your treatment options explained clearly to you?
6. Are you given a treatment plan to sign and a copy to take away with you?
7. Do you see a Dental Hygienist regularly?
8. Are you satisfied with your NHS treatment Yes / No

Please tell us more

9. What best describes your age group? (18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65-74; 75+)
10. How far have you travelled to your appointment today?

High Street Dentists - Practice questionnaire

Healthwatch East Sussex Enter and view programme for Dental Practices

June 2019: Previsit questionnaire for manager and/or staff.

Name of Dental Practice:

Date:

1. How many patients are NHS & how many Private?	No of NHS patients: No of Private patients:
2. Is your Practice currently accepting NHS patients?	
3. Where are patients signposted to if the Practice list is full?	
4. Is the Practice independently owned or part of a larger group?	
5. Where does the Practice refer patients to for out of hours/urgent dental care?	
6. How does the Practice support access to dental services for marginalized or socially excluded groups? Eg: traveler community, low income, English not first language, physical or mental disability?	

High Street Dentists 2019 - Out-of-Hours Voicemail

Mystery Shopping Checklist

Practice Name

Date:

Telephone No:

Out of Hours voice message:

Volume & tone	
Opening hours	
Emergency signposting - NHS	
Where to go	
Contact number for EDS	
Private OOH option	

High Street Dentists 2019 - Websites

Mystery Shopping Checklist

Practice Name

Website:

Information Required	Date & Comments	No of Clicks to find
Signpost via NHS England search		
Independent or part of a larger Group - state which		
Opening Times		
Booking online		
NHS availability		
NHS charging procedures		
Deposits required		
Exemptions information		
OOH information		
NHS Emergency Dental Service signposting		
Private OOH available		
Private OOH charging information		
Physical disability access		
Sensory impairment access		
Anxious patient		
Hygienist information + charging information		
Children's facilities		
Languages other than English?		

Emergency Dental Service - Patient questionnaire

1. Which town/village have you travelled from today?
2. How did you get here?
3. How did you find out about the Out of Hours Dental Service?
e.g. signposted by another agency:
 - My own dentist
 - NHS 111
 - GP
 - Healthwatch East Sussex
 - Internet search (self-referred)
 - Word of mouth - Friends/Family
 - Used the service previously?
 - Other, please state:
4. Did you try and seek alternative help before attending OOH service YES NO
5. If you said Yes in Q4, please tell us where you looked for alternative help (tick all that apply)
My own Dentist Internet Family /Friends Pharmacy
Other - please state
6. How long have you been experiencing your current dental problem?
7. Do you have access to a regular NHS Dentist? YES / NO
8. Do you attend regular dental check-up/treatment? YES / NO
9. If you answered No to Q8, please tell us why. Please tick all that apply
 - Anxious/uncomfortable with going to the dentist
 - NHS appointments not available at my nearest/preferred dentist
 - Cost
 - Disabled access to my local dental practice does not meet my needs
 - It's difficult to travel to my nearest NHS Dentist
 - Other reason - please state:
10. When was the last time you had planned appointment?
Under 6-months, 6 - 12 months, 1 - 2 years, 2 - 5 years, longer than 5 years, Don't know
11. a) If you have used the OOH services before, when was this?
Month / Year

12. Where was this? Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Out of county

13. Were you aware of a charging system YES / NO

14. If you answered YES to Q13 was this explained on triage? YES / NO

15. If you are exempt from charges, were you aware of what evidence you need to present at the time of visit? YES / NO

16. Is there anything you wish to say about the charges for this visit?

17. Were the treatment options fully explained to you for this visit? YES NO

Please explain your response

18. Do you feel your problem was dealt with appropriately for this visit?

YES NO

19. Please tell us the reason for your answer to Q18

20. Any other comments you wish to add about the service?

Emergency Dental Service - Out of Hours Voicemail

Mystery shopping checklist

Date:

Telephone No:

Out of Hours voice message:

Volume & tone	
Opening hours	
Eligibility Criteria	
Clinic location & address	
Other options available	
Other observations	

Emergency Dental Service - Websites

Mystery shopping checklist

NHS Emergency Dental Services websites

Name of Host provider

Information Required	Date & Comments	No of Clicks to find
Signpost via NHS England search		
Opening Times		
Booking information		
Clinic locations		
Clinic addresses		
Charging procedures		
Deposits required		
Exemptions information		
Physical disability access		
Sensory impairment access		
Children's facilities		
Languages other than English		