

NHS Dental

Services in Sussex

November 2020

Paul's story

“ I've tried phoning and they all just laugh and say they only do private now so what am I supposed to do? I can't eat. I can't have any kind of social life so what is the point of my existence?
I have now given up hope of ever getting any treatment!” ”

Paul, who is an Eastbourne resident in his early 60s, first contacted Healthwatch at the end of October 2020. He hadn't seen a dentist for a very long time as a bad experience with a dentist (with a broken drill piece getting stuck in his tooth) had left him fearful.

Receding gums and tooth loss was making Paul depressed, feeling unable to socialise (regardless of Lockdown) due to the way he looked. He was also having problems eating.

Having tried nearly every dentist in Eastbourne, he'd not found one that would treat him without going privately - at a cost of thousands of pounds. This was making him feel more upset about his situation - *I feel like just giving up!*

Paul's original request to Healthwatch was *Can you please tell me what I should do or where I should go to get a sympathetic dentist that can treat me under the NHS?*

We advised Paul of NHS 'Find a Dentist' website and what to do if he experiencing pain and needed help outside normal dentist surgery hours or over the weekend. We also suggested calling the NHS England contact centre on 0300 311 2233 and that further dentistry advice may be available from the Oral Health Foundation.

Oral Health Foundation response to Paul, was *We can understand why it is important for you to seek treatment to replace the teeth for eating and self-esteem but unfortunately now we are in another lockdown situation getting care such as yours is going to be difficult unless you pay privately.*

Paul received an email from NHS giving him the number 0300 123 1663 to call, which he did (in mid-November). He was told there were no dentists in his area taking on new patients currently. He repeatedly asked what he should do and was told *there are no dentists in your area taking on new patients*. He added that he couldn't eat. At this moment the conversation went downhill and he was told *of course you can eat!*

It's a disgrace that no-one is willing to help me and this is now affecting my Rheumatoid Arthritis (diagnosed and under consultant-led care) because of the worry and stress of losing even more teeth and not being able to eat anymore.

Paul feels that he is heading down the road of being hospitalised from *either severe depression or malnutrition and said then perhaps someone will bother to take notice!*

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Background information

An NHS dentist will offer a mix of NHS and private treatment but some are 100% private practices. If a dentist previously accepted you for NHS treatment and has not advised you there has been a change to 100% private practice, you can expect to be offered NHS treatment by that practice but not necessarily immediately.

NHS dental services should have resumed from early June 2020. As with so many other services, the need to keep people safe from the virus continues to mean there is less time available for dentists to talk to and treat patients under the NHS.

All dentists offering NHS treatment should be clearly explaining to people the priority criteria they are using and how that applies to people's individual circumstances. If a dentist tells you they are not offering NHS treatment, please advise your local Healthwatch and we can ask the NHS to *check the* payments to that practice.

A dental practice should be prepared to explain the priority criteria they are using and Healthwatch would expect that explanation to be provided by a clinically qualified person.

It should be noted that it is appropriate for a receptionist to ask questions by way of pre-screening (in the same way a GP receptionist would) to determine the most appropriate route for a person's care, including how to care for themselves if the issue is non-urgent.

If a dental practice holds an NHS contract, they should not be telling people they are not offering NHS treatment. They might legitimately inform someone that they are offering a limited service and that the person does not have a condition that is a priority at the moment. A dental practice should be prepared to explain what priority criteria they are using, and Healthwatch suggest it is not good enough for a non-clinician to be delegated that task, as they are not clinically qualified to do so.

Reduced NHS service should be exactly equal to the number of hours they would normally dedicate to NHS practice but could involve as little as 20% of the usual number of patients or treatments because of the additional need to leave space between patients and deep clean areas and equipment.

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Healthwatch spoke to the NHS dental helpline on 17 November and were told:

- **No dentists** are accepting new NHS patients for routine care in Kent or Sussex at the moment

Please note all practices with an NHS contract, are expected to at least offer telephone advice and triage for a face-to-face appointment to anyone whether they are known to the practice or not, within their NHS capacity.

- Advised to call back every 3-4 weeks for an update from NHS dental helpline, but told unlikely to be a change before Christmas
- Advised that temporary DIY filling kits are available from pharmacies/supermarkets for cracks/holes in teeth
- They are offering telephone consultations in some circumstances but would not give any qualifying criteria.

What's being done to improve NHS dental services?

NHS England (who commission dentistry) told Healthwatch on 19 November 2020 that NHS dentistry **is still being prioritised based on clinical need** (following the guidance of the Chief Dental Officer), with limited treatment time being offered to those who have the most urgent needs.

Further national guidance is needed (originally expected in September 2020) on how the NHS contracted time is allocated. At the moment this can be open to interpretation. Through national Healthwatch we are asking for this guidance to be published without further delay.

Paul, and many others, have shared their recent difficult experiences, which has helped us to get NHS England to listen to the plight of residents because **there simply isn't enough NHS dental services**, particularly in some Sussex villages and towns.

Sussex NHS Commissioners has asked NHS England's regional team to look at refreshing the needs assessment for dentistry in light of learning from COVID. This is a way of understanding what services need to be commissioned.

Locally, NHS England has agreed to look at alternative ways of providing dental services, so that people who can't pay private dental costs but urgently need help, can get access to a dentist through an NHS route.

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The local NHS England team will be sharing a list of dentists who may be in a position to offer NHS advice or treatment, and Healthwatch will be helping NHS England identify those who are advising people that they are not offering NHS services. This is to ensure these practices do not receive payments from public funds.

NHS England has also agreed to **provide information on what should be considered as urgent** and how people can get access to treatment when their dental needs are such. Once we have this, we will be working with Sussex NHS Commissioners on getting more dental communication to local people.

A simple guide to what people can expect from their local dentist is urgently needed. We have also asked that dentists update their website to explain what they are offering, we shall also ask that this includes what priority criteria they are using during COVID.

NHS England is planning to introduce regular briefings to keep us all up to date on what is happening and what local people can expect going forward.

We will be seeking an update on this next month.

How you can help?



NHS England recommends you **persevere in trying to contact dentist surgeries at this time** and ask to be put on the waiting list for NHS treatment.

They also suggest widening your geographical search and NHS England Call Centre has also confirmed they are giving out contact details for surgeries 20 to 30 miles from people's homes. We recognise that some residents do not drive, but want to confirm there isn't a *catchment* area for dentists.

We recognise it can be difficult for people to put across their concerns, but please keep trying to contact dentists ask to speak to a dentist and take the time to share the impact your dental condition is having on you and your health.

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Useful information

Understanding NHS dental charges: <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/dentists/understanding-nhs-dental-charges/>

NHS Dentistry charge exemptions: <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/help-nhs-dental-costs/free-nhs-dental-treatment>

NHS BSA Dental Services knowledge base: <https://nhsbsa-live.powerappsportals.com/knowledgebase/category/?id=CAT-01011>

How to spot potential mouth cancer

Mouth cancer can start in different parts of the mouth, including the lips, gums or soft sides of the mouth. Oropharyngeal cancer starts in the oropharynx. The oropharynx is the part of the throat (pharynx) just behind the mouth. It includes tonsil cancer and cancer in the back part of the tongue.

Symptoms of mouth cancer include:

- An ulcer or white or red patch anywhere in the mouth that does not heal within 3 weeks.
- A lump or swelling anywhere in the mouth, jaw or neck that persists for more than 3 weeks.
- Difficulty swallowing, chewing or moving the jaw or tongue.
- Numbness of tongue or other area of the mouth.
- A feeling that something is caught in the throat.
- A chronic sore throat or hoarseness that persists more than 6 weeks.
- Unexplained loosening of teeth.

If you have any concerns that you are experiencing the symptoms above, please don't hesitate to contact your GP. Your GP will ask you about your symptoms including what they are when you get them, and what makes them better or worse. They will also examine you. Your doctor might arrange tests or referral to a specialist.

If you have been asked to take photos of the inside of your mouth to be sent with a referral to a specialist, this video by the local NHS may be helpful to give you tips on how to do it <https://youtu.be/jb1sqgAvEzc>

(1.2 26/11/2020)