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Introduction

Through 2020 and 2021, Healthwatch England has collated data relating to NHS dentistry from local Healthwatch organisations across England. This includes the 10 Healthwatch in Greater Manchester.

At the same time we were drawing up our own dentistry report covering the Greater Manchester footprint.

In May 2021 Healthwatch England published a briefing on this topic. Their findings are closely aligned with ours and Healthwatch in Greater Manchester fully supports their recommendations.

Rather than publish our own separate report with Greater Manchester recommendations, we have chosen to produce this supplemental report which provides the Greater Manchester data. This shows why we feel that the Healthwatch England recommendations should be considered by the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership.

Healthwatch England Report

The Healthwatch England briefing can be downloaded via:

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/report/2021-05-24/dentistry-during-covid-19-insight-briefing>

The key findings nationally are echoed in Greater Manchester and fall into the following categories:

- Delayed and unequal access
- Disrupted care
- Pressure to go private
- Being left in pain
- Poor information
- Affordability
- Access during the pandemic
- Future dental care

Recommendations

We fully support the four actions recommended by Healthwatch England:

1. **A more rapid and radical reform of the way dentistry is commissioned and provided** - recognising that the current arrangements do not meet the needs of many people who cannot access NHS dental care in a timely way and acknowledge issues faced by the dental profession.
2. **Using the reform of commissioning to tackle the twin crises of access and affordability** - ensuring that people are not excluded from dental services because of lack of provision locally or difficulty in meeting charges. Currently, there are significant inequalities that must be removed. New arrangements should be based on maximising access to NHS dental services, with particular emphasis on reducing inequalities.
3. **Greater clarity in the information about NHS dentistry** - improving information, including online, so that people have a clear picture of where and how they can access services, and the charges they will need to pay. Particularly, the reform must address dentistry 'registration' which causes significant confusion for both services and patients.
4. **Look at using dental practices to support people's general health** - harnessing opportunities, such as the development of Primary Care Networks, to link oral health to other key issues such as weight management and smoking cessation.

Greater Manchester Summary

1. Across Greater Manchester local Healthwatch organisations recorded 102 enquiries regarding NHS dentistry in 2019/20. That figure increased to 650 in the period April 2020 to 19 March 2021. A six-fold increase.
2. The qualitative data was analysed by theme; accessibility, treatment concerns, cost and health screening requirements. Whilst some enquiries raised concern regarding more than one theme, only 2.3% of overall enquiries in 2020/21 related to treatment, cost or health screening alone. 97.7% of enquiries raised issues of accessibility.
3. All services have been impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic and therefore it is reasonable to make an assumption that both the increase in enquiries and the concerns regarding accessibility have some correlation with the way services have responded. The greatest proportion of enquiries were recorded in Q4 2020/21 during the longest and most recent lockdown in England - 38.3%.

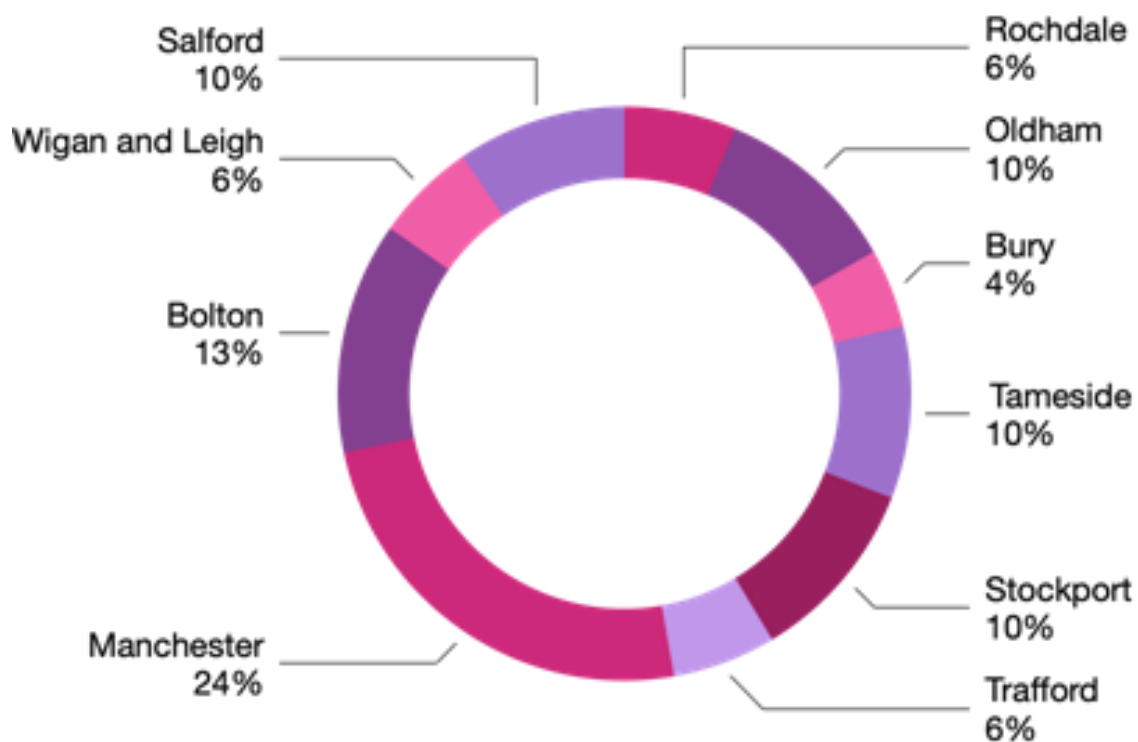
Methodology

It has been possible to produce the report because much of the data had already been collected from routine enquiries. Some of the data is already in the public domain due to the contract that local Healthwatch organisations have with local communities to publish the results of surveys. Examples include the 2014 report by Healthwatch Bolton, “*Accessing NHS Dentistry in Bolton*” and the 2021 *Review of dentistry services in Oldham* produced by Healthwatch Oldham.

2020/21 Enquiries recorded by local Healthwatch	
<i>Healthwatch</i>	<i>Number</i>
Bolton	85
Bury	29
Manchester	159
Oldham	68
Rochdale	41
Salford	62
Stockport	68
Tameside	63
Trafford	38
Wigan and Leigh	37

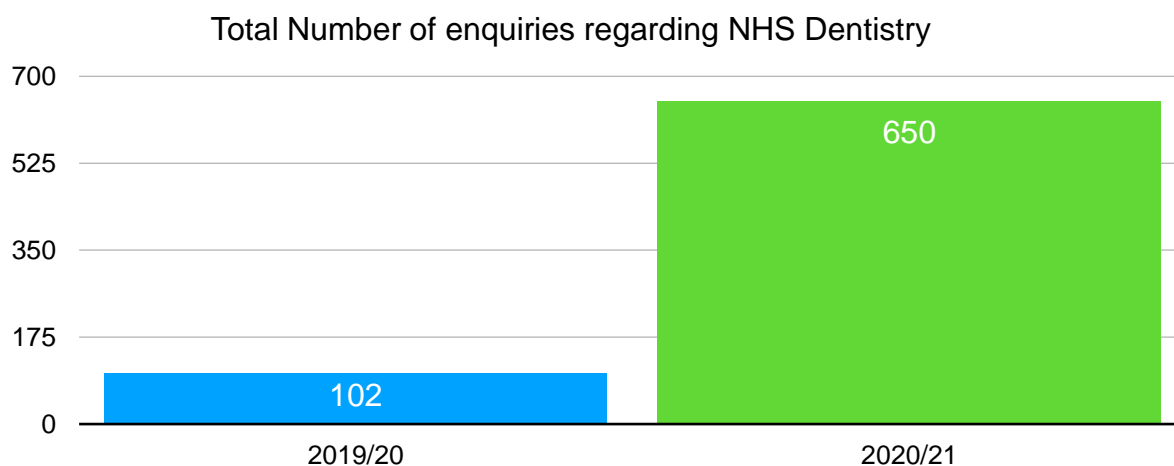
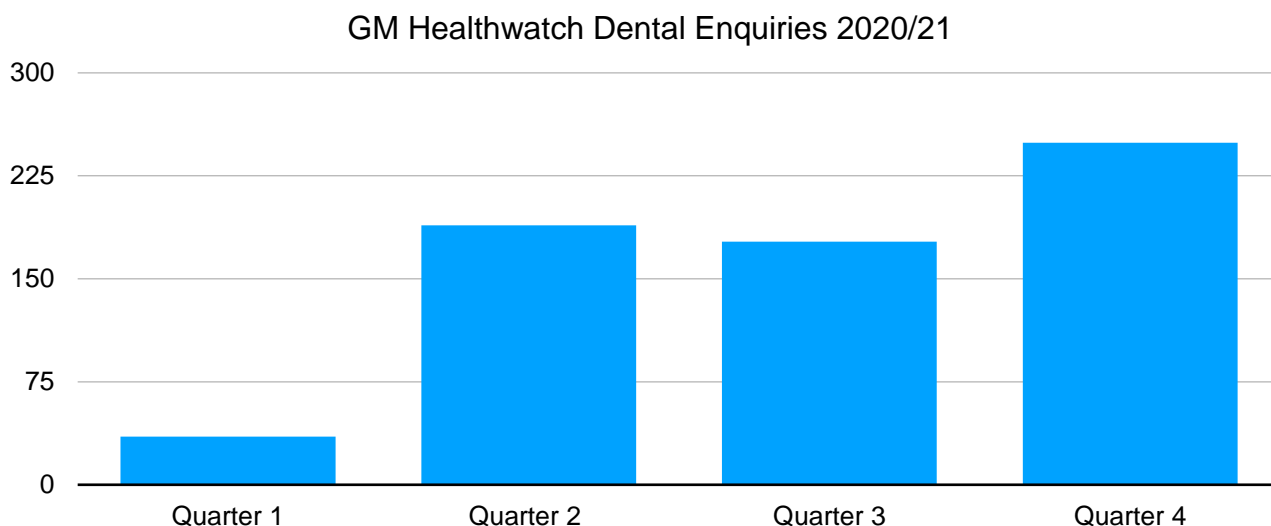
Overview of the data

The data used for this report did not include protected characteristics and therefore analysis by age, gender, ethnicity etc. has not been possible. Furthermore, whilst the data below represents the percentage contribution to the overall total there has been no attempt to compare that with population size. The purpose of the report is to *share the collective local voice* from the communities across Greater Manchester on the subject of NHS Dentistry.



Issues of accessibility

Review of the quantitative data provides a rich picture of repeated telephone calls to dental practices in the search for an appointment slot with examples of people being told that there are no NHS appointments available, but access seems to be available if the person is able to pay for private treatment.



Here are some typical comments we received from local people (via our Healthwatch teams):

- I have got toothache and I have rang 14 dentists and none of them are taking on NHS patients. I looked on the internet and it said to contact you.*
- How can I find a dentist without calling all the dentists in Bolton and surrounding areas?*
- I am trying to find a dentist for my daughter...[she is] living with depression and her dental issues are beginning to affect family life (she is taking it out on her children). I'm looking after my daughter's children. I have contacted a lot of dentists. None of them are accepting new patients but they all say they can see my daughter as a private patient. My daughter cannot afford private dental treatment and believes this is a form of discrimination between those who can pay and those who cannot.*

- *A lady called us asking if we knew of any dentists across Greater Manchester taking on NHS patients as she was struggling to find one.*
- *I wonder if you could help me. I'm currently looking for an NHS dentist. I had a very bad Pregnancy earlier this year which caused severe vomiting over several months, my teeth have taken a huge toll from this. I'm in need of dental assistance as I'm now in pain. I have rang multiple dentists of which none are taking on, I'm at wits end and not sure where to go from here.*
- *Caller is in pain. Cannot find an NHS dentist. Has a car and is willing to travel. Has tried over 40 practices and is asking for help. Has been told he can be seen tomorrow as a private patient. This is a two tier service.*
- *My dentist has retired and the practice says I need to find a new dentist but I am registered with them. What do I need to do?*
- *I need to find a dentist please can you help. I am in receipt of ESA and cannot afford the private costs. I am in pain and need help.*
- *I'm 70 years old and in I need to register with a dentist but after ringing round all the dentists in Bolton I can't find one taking new NHS patients. I have just paid £1000 to get my teeth filled etc. but as I'm a pensioner I can't afford to pay out again for any more treatment. Can you help me please?*
- *Can you help me. I am registered with a dentist but they say they cannot see me. I am in pain.*
- *First of all, it was really difficult to find relevant website where I could find dentists. Eventually, when found it, there were over 250 dentist who claimed they are taking new NHS patients. I called every single one of them (phone bill was triple the usual amount) and all of them said they are not taking new NHS patients. Some of them said they don't have enough staff to update that website, some of them said to call them in 3 months time but almost all of them suggested that if I go to them privately, I can be seen as early as next day.*

These unedited quotes are typical of the nature of enquiries, the common themes around accessibility being:

- People making multiple calls,
- People turning to Healthwatch for help because they are unable to navigate the system,
- NHS Websites out of date / or not up to date
- Misunderstanding of the concept of 'registration'.

Hidden under the magnitude of those common themes there are small numbers of examples of informal carers searching for access for housebound adults, women in pregnancy seeking access, specialist cancer centres advising patients that they need a dental assessment before commence of treatment for their cancer, and children or those with a disability being unable to have access to timely dental attention. The numbers are small but to those few who have contacted their

local Healthwatch the scale of the challenge to them in those circumstances is considerable as is the effort that local Healthwatch Officers will go to in order to try to assist each person.

There are stories of people spending hours on the telephone and others wishing that they could spend hours on the telephone but being unable to because they have insufficient 'credit' on their mobile phones. For these individuals the sense of inequality is profound; they cannot afford private treatment and neither can they afford the calls to dental practices or the urgent dental care service, now called the Dental Helpline.

The Greater Manchester Healthwatch Network remains concerned that pre-pandemic capacity, as evidenced in the reports referenced, is not meeting the requirements of the communities of Greater Manchester, and reference to people contacting their practice for appointments fails to address the issue of people not having a dentist.

It is the opinion of the Greater Manchester Healthwatch Network that the issues of accessibility arise as a result of inadequate capacity and that the problems highlighted in this report are a symptom of there being insufficient units of dental activity commissioned.

NHS Website: 'dentists - find a service'

In preparing this report each local Healthwatch was asked for their opinion of the NHS Website - dental 'find a service function' based on experience. These are typical comments from staff in Greater Manchester Healthwatch organisations:

- *Most callers are aware of the website and many have used it prior to calling us. However there are two aspects that make the use of the website difficult. One is that the practice availability is not accurate, leading people to have to call a large number of practices to find a place. Second that the geographic based search at times leads people to think they can only choose from those nearby practices, when in reality they can go further afield.*
- *When people have been in touch with us it is because they have usually used the NHS website and been unsuccessful in registering with an NHS dentist. They have stated that the site tells them that there is availability and find it is different when they ring the practice. We explain that the information is rarely updated and only to use the service to obtain the contact details of the dental practice and ignore the availability information as it is not up to date. This understandably frustrates people.*
- *'Much of the information listed about local dentists on the NHS website is out-of-date and does not provide the basic information which people need. Since the beginning of the pandemic we have received a significant amount of calls from people who are desperately trying to find a dentist which is accepting NHS patients, and yet some of the information published on the NHS website has not been updated for over 4 years. More needs to be done to ensure that the information is kept up-to-date so that people can access the dental care that they need.*
- *Healthwatch X is very reluctant to signpost clients to the NHS website (dental search) as a source of information because, in our experience, this method of finding an NHS dentist is completely ineffective. This function really is not an option for finding an NHS dentist. We hear many stories from people who have been left to find an NHS dentist by*

ringing around and when they find their way to us, they are usually distressed and frustrated because they cannot find one. Moving forward, it will be very helpful for NHS dentist commissioners to be very honest about this function and decide for themselves whether it is fit for purpose.

- *We have known for years that it s no good because dentists don t update their information in terms of whether they have slots for new patients - and it seems there is no contractual requirement for them to do this. Updating is actually disincentivised because practices have told us anecdotally that whenever they have changed the website entry to show space for new patients they have been inundated with phone calls which they can t deal with - because they might be the only practice in an area showing vacancies everyone from miles around starts to phone!*

Conclusion

The focus of this report has been on giving volume to the *collective local voice* of the people of Greater Manchester who are seeking the support of local Healthwatch to navigate access to an NHS dentist. At the same time, and without undermining the voice of local people, the network empathises with dental practices who are trying to manage capacity and as always, local Healthwatch welcome communications from Local Dental Committees that can helpfully be shared with members of the public.

That said, the findings of this report are neither new or novel. Problems accessing an NHS dentist significantly pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic and signposting information on the NHS website - “find a dentist function” are not fit for purpose.

For the past five years, and more, there has been a body of evidence that NHS dental capacity is insufficient to meet demand. This report provides evidence of a six fold increase in the number of contacts with Healthwatch across Greater Manchester between 2019/20 and 2020/21. Inevitably the pandemic has had an impact with practices initially closed and then seeing fewer patients. However a return to pre-pandemic levels of capacity is not the full solution since there was already insufficient capacity to meet the need for NHS dental care.

There is an urgent need for NHS England to update the NHS dental ‘find a service function’ of their website and Healthwatch organisations across Greater Manchester are willing to be consulted on the areas of that website that need the most pressing attention. Furthermore Healthwatch organisations across Greater Manchester will continue to monitor this topic as a means of keeping the evidence of local experience alive and providing data for recipients of this report.

Responses

Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership response to GM Healthwatch report on dentistry, August 2021

Like many other health services, Greater Manchester's dental services have faced unprecedented challenges since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. Staff continue to work hard to see as many patients as possible, whilst ensuring that services are safe. Practices are operating at a reduced capacity due to measures that remain in place to limit the spread of Covid-19.

Early on in the pandemic, we set up 92 urgent dental centres across Greater Manchester. These centres continue to operate, supporting practices that may be struggling due to staffing levels and offer urgent care to people who do not have a regular dentist. Patients can access the centres by referral from their dentist or via the Greater Manchester NHS Dental Helpline (0333 332 3800, 8am to 10pm, seven days a week).

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed additional pressure on a system that was already facing significant challenges, which is not unique to Greater Manchester.

The delivery of NHS dental services is determined by a national dental contract that sets out how services should be delivered by dental providers. Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership commissions (or buys) dental services, in accordance with this contract, for the people of Greater Manchester using money given to us by NHS England nationally and we have to keep within a specific budget. Every NHS dental appointment and course of treatment comes with a cost that is paid for from this budget. The nationally agreed patient charge associated with attendance at dental practices, for those who pay for NHS treatment, contributes to this budget which helps us buy more services for the population.

The Partnership's dental team continues to work hard to support providers to increase capacity whilst longer term proposals are being developed.

In Greater Manchester, we have devolved powers over health and care, which means that more decisions are made here, rather than at a national level. This means we have a little more flexibility in terms of dental services than other areas, but we are still constrained by the national contract. We make the most of this flexibility to commission innovative services and initiatives that help to address health inequalities and meet the needs of our population. This includes dentistry for the homeless, dementia friendly dentistry, empowering hospital and care home staff to encourage 'mouth care' on the ward and in residential homes, improving the treatment of gum disease and placing a greater focus on taking care of baby teeth in young children. We are in regular communication with Healthwatch organisations and local dental networks to hear feedback and gain insight into demand and need at a local level.

Local Dental Committees response to GM Healthwatch report on dentistry, August 2021

The Local Dental Committees are statutory bodies established under the NHS Act to represent dentists within the NHS. They are not a sort of trade union, that function is carried out by other bodies.

Dental practices deliver dental care under a contract with the NHS, this dictates both the amount of NHS care they deliver (measured in Units of Dental Activity or UDAs) and when they deliver the care. Where patients have to contribute towards the cost of care this is collected by practices at a rate set by the NHS in 3 bands depending on the needs of the patient. These funds are accounted to the NHS, not kept by the practices.

In contrast to medical care, patients do not “register” with a practice, under the current contract they are examined, treated then discharged with a recommendation of when further examination is appropriate. Nevertheless most practices recognise the value of continuing care and accept patients back for years and decades.

The Covid pandemic vastly reduced the provision of care, for 3 months practices were closed by order and could only offer advice over the phone, antibiotics where appropriate and onward referral in the case of an emergency. Later when allowed to reopen, practices had to observe onerous infection control protocols meaning a vastly reduced number of patients could be seen and treated.

However the service reacted quickly to establish a network of Urgent Care Centres where patients could receive urgent treatment, even if absolutely necessary, patients suffering Covid infection. Even as the rest of the dental service is re-established, albeit at a reduced level, these centres persist ensuring high priority patients groups receive the care they need.

We look forward to exploring changes in the way dentistry is commissioned, particularly increasing the emphasis on prevention; however there is a pressing need for more dentistry to be commissioned.

Appendix 1. Healthwatch organisations in Greater Manchester

Healthwatch	Contact details
Healthwatch Bolton	27 Silverwell Street, BL1 1PP Tel. 01204 394603 Web: www.healthwatchbolton.co.uk
Healthwatch Bury	St John's House, 1st Floor, 155-163 The Rock, Bury, BL9 0ND Tel. 0161 253 6300 Web: healthwatchbury.co.uk
Healthwatch Manchester	Canada House, 3 Chepstow Street, Manchester, M1 5FW Tel. 0300 078 0669 Web: www.healthwatchmanchester.co.uk
Healthwatch Oldham	12 Manchester Chambers, West Street, Oldham, OL1 1LF Tel. 0161 622 5700 Web: www.healthwatcholdham.co.uk
Healthwatch Rochdale	104-106 Drake Street, Rochdale, OL16 1PQ Tel. 01706 249 575 Web: www.healthwatchrochdale.org.uk
Healthwatch Salford	The Old Town Hall, 5 Irwell Place, Eccles, Salford, M30 0FN Tel. 0330 355 0300 Web: www.healthwatchesalford.co.uk
Healthwatch Stockport	Land O'Cakes, 48 Middle Hillgate, Stockport, SK1 3DL Tel. 0161 974 0753 Web: www.healthwatchstockport.co.uk
Healthwatch Tameside	95-97 Penny Meadow, Ashton-under-Lyne, OL6 6EP Tel. 0161 667 2526 Web: www.healthwatchtameside.co.uk
Healthwatch Trafford	Unit 65-66 Stretford Mall, Chester Road, Stretford, M32 9BD Tel. 0300 999 0303 Web: healthwatchtrafford.co.uk
Healthwatch Wigan and Leigh	Ashland House, Dobson Park Way, Ince-in-Makerfield, Wigan, WN2 2DX Tel. 01942 834666 Web: healthwatchwiganandleigh.co.uk