

Swansea Bay Community Health Council

Accessing NHS dental care

Getting to the Root
of the Problem
February 2022



Accessible Formats

This report is also available in Welsh.

If you would like this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us.

You can download an electronic copy from our website:

<https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/>

Or ask for a copy by contacting our office. Contact details can be found on page 49.

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About Swansea Bay Community Health Council (CHC)

Swansea Bay CHC is the independent watchdog of the National Health Service (NHS) within Neath Port Talbot and Swansea. We encourage and support people to have a voice in the design and delivery of healthcare for their families and local communities.

Swansea Bay CHC works with the NHS, inspection and regulatory bodies. We provide an important link between those who plan and deliver NHS services, those who inspect and regulate it and those who use it.

We hear from the public in many different ways. Before the coronavirus pandemic, we regularly visited NHS services to hear from patients while they were receiving care and treatment. We spoke directly to their families and carers too. We also heard from people at local community events and by talking to community representatives and groups.

Since the coronavirus pandemic, we needed to change the ways we engaged with the public and patients. We used surveys, social media and videoconferencing apps such as Zoom, Teams and Skype, to hear from people directly about their views and experiences of NHS services. Apps have made it possible to attend virtual engagement events too. We continue to hear from people through enquiries and our complaints advocacy service. Swansea Bay CHC represents the “patient and public” voice in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea.

Background and Introduction

In line with our Annual Operational Plan 2021/22, we set out to collect feedback from people about their experiences of accessing routine and urgent dental care.

A recurring issue

In March 2020, we published our report, 'NHS Dental Services across Swansea Bay: A Report on Patient Experience'¹. This report raised concerns over access to NHS dental services, highlighting that some people in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea were missing out when it came to accessing NHS dental care.

People are still telling us their experiences have not improved, with access to NHS dental care continuing to be the biggest issue. Finding an NHS dentist was "impossible" for many people. For others, the long waiting times for treatment was having a significant impact on their dental health. People told us they faced pressure to go private or have no treatment at all. The cost of dental treatment was a further barrier to dental care for many people.

A national issue

What we are hearing in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea reflects the findings across Wales - people are struggling to get the dental treatment they need when they need it. Reports undertaken by

¹Read the full report here: <https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/what-we-have-to-say/report-library/sb-chc-thematic-reports-2020/dental-experience-report-march-2020-pdf/>

Community Health Councils across Wales² mirror what people have been telling us about accessing NHS dental care. The Board of CHC's recent, Wales-wide report³, looked into the impact of the waiting times backlog on people who are waiting for diagnosis or treatment in Wales. Dental services was an area people shared feedback about most often. Their report also highlighted that parents were worried about the longer-term effects of their children not being able to access routine NHS appointments to help keep their teeth healthy. Our report makes the same finding.

The dental crisis is prominent in the media in Wales too, with Wales Online⁴ recently reporting that patients are performing their own dentistry as NHS care is impossible to find. Sadly, this was reflected in feedback we received.

The picture across the UK

It is not just Community Health Councils across Wales witnessing these concerns. Reports from bodies across the health sector tell the same story. Healthwatch, the Health and Social Care Champion for people in England, report seeing large increases in the volume of negative dental feedback, with access to NHS dental care being one of the most significant issues people are raising with them⁵.

² Have you got a dentist? Hywel Dda CHC, April 2021. Available here: <https://hywelddachc.nhs.wales/files/reports/have-you-got-a-dentist/>

³ Inquiry into the impact of the waiting times backlog on people who are waiting for diagnosis or treatment in Wales Available here: <https://boardchc.nhs.wales/having-a-say/what-weve-heard-from-you1/national-reports-accordion/national-reports1/inquiry-into-the-impact-of-the-waiting-times-backlog-on-people-in-wales/>

⁴ Available here: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/nhs-wales-dentistry-in-crisis-22812321>

⁵ Available here: [Recovery of NHS dental care too slow to help thousands left in pain | Healthwatch](#)

The impact of the pandemic

In March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the UK, the NHS in Wales took action to respond to the emergency. Like all health and care services, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the delivery of dental care.

We have seen an increase in the number of people sharing their experience of trying to access routine and urgent NHS dental care. People are telling us that despite covid-19 restrictions easing across Wales, the dental situation is not improving and they continue to struggle when it comes to accessing dental care.

Swansea Bay Health Board update - Dental services and Covid-19

We contacted Swansea Bay Health Board's Primary and Community Services team in January 2022, to seek an update on the current dental situation across Neath Port Talbot and Swansea. We were told that within the Swansea Bay Health Board area there were:

- 56 dental practices
- 2 Orthodontic practices, and
- 2 specialist dental provider practices

As a result of the pandemic and the continued social distancing and enhanced infection control processes in dental practices, Swansea Bay Health Board told us that capacity to see patients was only around 40% of pre-covid times. They told us that all dental practices were open to see patients for routine check-ups; however, they needed to prioritise

those patients with urgent needs, those who had their treatment delayed and those with higher oral health needs.

What practices are taking on NHS patients?

The Health Board told us they do not hold a dental waiting list nor a list of practices taking on NHS patients. We heard how Welsh Government had set an expectation for 2021/22 that all NHS dental practices have a responsibility to see new patients; practices would see patients mainly from the waiting list held by the practice or reacting to patients who contact them directly. We were told that the Health Board's advice to any patient looking for an NHS dentist is to contact a number of practices and ask to be put on their waiting list. The Health Board added that there is no limit to how many waiting lists a patient could be on.

The Health Board advised that if a patient, without a regular dentist, has an urgent dental issue such as facial swelling or is in pain, they should call NHS 111 Wales, where they would be assessed. If necessary, they would be referred to an urgent dental appointment at a practice.

Our report is based on feedback we received from 1370 people and highlights the struggle that many people face trying to access NHS dental care. The patient stories represent a small percentage of patients across the Swansea Bay area who are waiting for dental care. We recognise that everyone's individual experience will be different.

The CHC acknowledges the additional pressures on dental practices because of enhanced infection and prevention control measures.

People are also sympathetic to the NHS Health and care services who have worked tirelessly to deal with COVID-19. However, access to NHS dental care was highlighted as an issue before COVID-19.

What we did

Throughout 2021, we asked people across the Swansea Bay area to share their experiences of accessing NHS dental care.

People shared feedback with us by completing the Board of CHC's national Covid-19 survey, by taking part in 'quick polls' online and by contacting us by post, phone, email and website.

We reached out to people using social media, including Facebook Instagram and Twitter, providing direct links to our online surveys. Hard copies of surveys were available too.

We shared our engagement messages promoting the survey, with many local groups and stakeholders, in an effort to reach as many people as possible, including:

- ☺ Council for Voluntary Service (Neath Port Talbot & Swansea)
- ☺ GP cluster networks
- ☺ Local Area Coordinators
- ☺ Swansea Bay University Health Board
- ☺ Local community groups, including Covid-19 support groups
- ☺ Seldom heard groups
- ☺ Local and national charities

We picked up feedback in other ways too, e.g., through our enquiries and complaints advocacy service, local community networks, community representatives and groups, monitoring of health board activities, including feedback and complaints.

Who we are hearing from

Here is a snapshot of the equalities information for the 797 people who shared their views and experiences with us through the Board of CHCs national survey.

Of those who completed our monitoring questions in the survey:

Around 81% identified as heterosexual

Around 77% told us they were White British, Welsh, English, Scottish or Northern Irish

People were aged between 13 and 85 years old

The majority told us they had no religion (47%) or were Christian (35%)

655 people (around 82%) were women

Around 13% considered themselves to have a disability

170 people (around 21%) told us they looked after, or gave help or support to someone because of a long-term disability (learning difficulty, mental ill-health, or age-related problems)

You can find out from our Equality Plan what we are doing to hear from different groups of people so that we can better represent the diversity of the communities we serve. You can find our Equality Plan on our website: <https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/about-us/our-governance/governance-documents/equality-plan-2021-2022-pdf/>

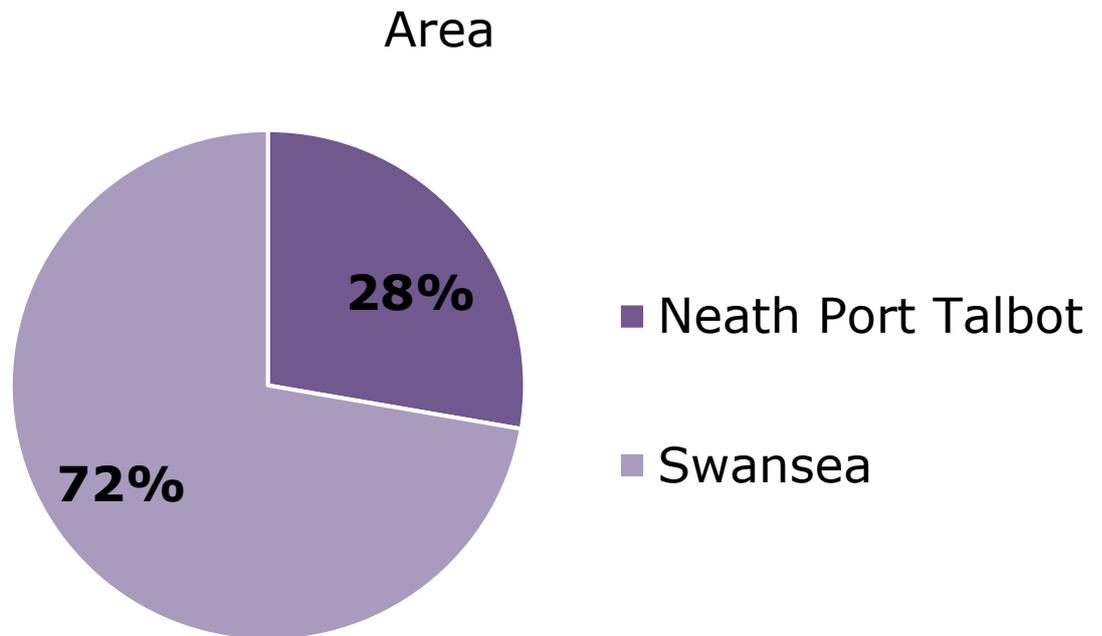
What we heard

Of the 1370 people who shared their experience with us:

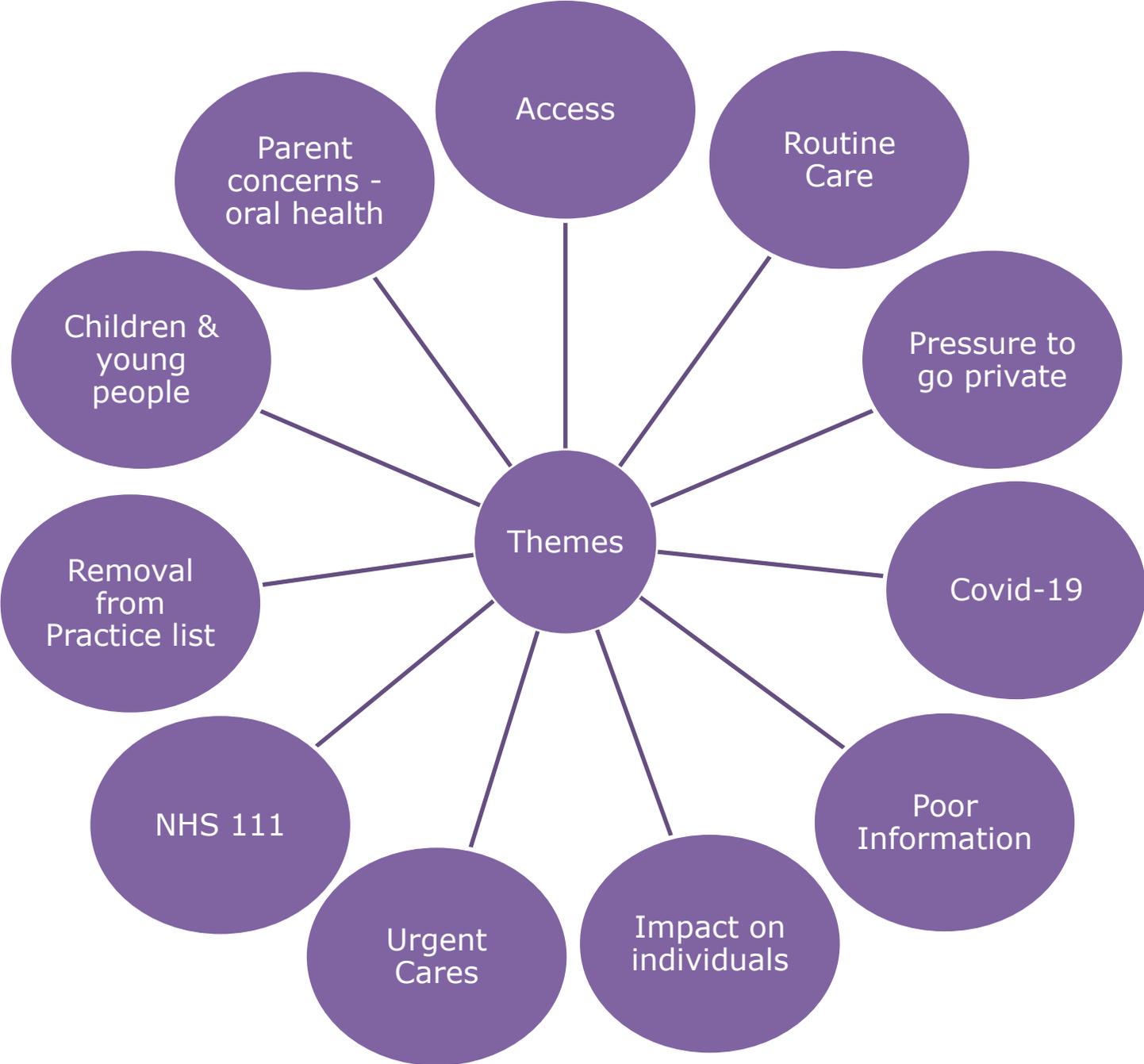
- 797 people completed the online survey
- 573 people responded to our 'quick poll' online (see page 25)

Survey Findings

Of the 797 people who completed our online survey, 576 people told us they were from the Swansea area and 221 from Neath Port Talbot. The pie chart below shows the breakdown.



Summary of main feedback themes



Access

Finding an NHS dentist

A significant number of people told us they were unable to access NHS dental care because practices were either not taking on new NHS patients or had no available appointments. Many told us they regularly called multiple practices to check for availability.

"I cannot get into a dentist after ringing all dentist within a 15 mile radius of my address"

"I've gone through the NHS Wales site and telephoned on a regular basis the list of 20 closest dentists to me which say they are accepting NHS patients, some even as far away as Neath. Every time I am told, "sorry we are not taking on at the moment"

"Despite contacting over 20 dentists, none are taking on new patients or will deal with emergencies for patients who are not on their books"

Some people told us they had been trying for many years to get an NHS appointment.

"For the last 3 years it's been impossible to find a dentist taking NHS patients"

"My son has been trying to get an NHS dentist for several years and has no dental treatment in all that time. He is only told time and time again to join on a [private] plan. It is disgusting"

"I've been trying to register with a dentist for over 2 years now. Apparently, there is a huge waiting list at every practice"

Others who have moved to the Swansea Bay area have also struggled to access dental care.

"I moved to Wales 4 years ago and can't get into a dentist unless I go private. I am on waiting lists but that is it "

"I moved to Swansea during the pandemic. I have called every dentist in the Swansea area to see if they are taking on NHS [patients] but have not had any luck for the past year and a half"

"I've been trying with no luck since before the pandemic to find an NHS dentist willing to take my family on since we returned home to Swansea in September 2019"

Urgent Appointments only

Many people told us they are still unable to book routine care with some struggling to get urgent appointments too.

"Every so often, I receive an email telling me that my check-up is due, but they can't see me unless it's an emergency"

"The side of my back molar broke off, leaving a large hole under the existing filling. I rang my dentist to be told that, unless it was causing extreme pain or infected, they could not see me"

Consequences of no access

The impact of not being able to access care led to many people experiencing a number of problems.

Pain and discomfort

The word, "Pain" was used many times in the feedback; people told us that being unable to access the right treatment or it being delayed, left them with pain, swellings, 'chipped' teeth and broken fillings.

"A temporary filling a year ago and I'm still suffering with no pain relief or care"

Disrupted Care

Others were left, unable to complete treatments already started.

"Lost my front teeth from being involved in an accident 18 months ago and started dental treatment which would have been completed by June 2020 but due to Covid, all were cancelled....It is demoralising for a lad to have no front teeth. The dentures they gave me are held together by super glue. I cannot believe that there is no way that treatment can be done."

Worsening Conditions

We heard how some people, unable to get the care they needed, led to worsening dental problems and sometimes tooth loss.

"I have an impacted wisdom tooth that has split and is infected. I advised them, but they have said they are still not willing to see me"

"Several emergency appointments and nothing to be done. Eventually given antibiotics and painkillers. Month later took the tooth out admitting that it could have been saved but could not do any drilling. Gutted"

Reliance on painkillers and antibiotics

Some people told us they were given antibiotics to help manage their pain, which provided temporary relief, but could later lead to reinfections.

"I have had to use the emergency dentist 5 times in the last 6 months as I had an abscess in my tooth. As they were not allowed to do many treatments because of COVID, I've just been given antibiotics on numerous occasions. I had to use the service again 2 weeks ago as the infection returned again. If I could have had the treatment at my first emergency appointment it would have saved me months of pain and the NHS money"

Temporary filling kits

We heard how many people were being directed to buy temporary filling kits and treat themselves when practices could not provide appointments.

"Broke my tooth on the weekend. Rang my dentist on Monday to get an appointment, only to be told by the receptionist that if I was not in pain to go and buy a temporary tooth repair kit and fill it myself. I was told they are only seeing patients that are in pain. I have tried to use the temporary kit but it keeps falling out. My tongue now has a sore spot on it where it is rubbing on my broken tooth"

"A large filling came out. Told by dentist to fill it myself with pack from pharmacy, which I did with great difficulty. Filler came out 4 times. Packet says temporary & only to be removed by dentist"

"They suggested that I use a temporary filling from the pharmacy and try to keep the area clean. For 18 months I have been refilling with the temporary filler which lasts approximately a week. The hole has got bigger as bits of tooth break off so there is no way of keeping the filler in place"

One person told us they resorted to pulling out their own teeth after failing to get NHS dental appointment.

"Since Covid started cannot get any dentist. A dentist was supposed to phone me when they had a vacancy. Two teeth I pulled out myself"

Without proper treatment, one person told us they put up with extreme pain and continue to have difficulty eating due to the pain and discomfort.

“I started having toothache back in October 2020 and went to my dentist to find out one of my fillings had fallen out and it needed re-doing. But due to Covid, I couldn’t get this done until 3 weeks later. I was in agony at this point, and it turned in to an infection. I went back before my 3-week appointment and was given antibiotics. These cleared the infection for a few days but then by the time of my appointment the infection came back so they weren’t able to do my filling. Was given another batch of antibiotics and another appointment for a month later. The infection never cleared and travelled to my ear and neck. I had to ring 111 and was prescribed strong Co-codomol for the pain. Due to it being my mouth, I could not eat or drink either. By the time I went back for the next appointment the tooth had got worse and I now needed a root canal, but the dentist didn’t have the correct tools for this, so I had to book another appointment a month later. The infection had come back by this appointment, so I was postponed again. I didn’t get my root canal procedure done until February 2021, so 4 months later. I lost loads of weight in this period, as I was unable to properly eat solid foods for 4 months. If the filling had been done at the first appointment, then this would never have happened. I still have jaw pain now and am unable to chew in a certain part of my mouth due to this”

Mental Well-being

We heard how a lack of dental care could also affect people's self-confidence and mental well-being.

"I have been on the waiting list for a dentist for 8 months since before the first lockdown. I had to use the out of hours service twice and they refused to do anything other than just remove the teeth when I was told they could have actually been saved. Now I have 2 noticeable gaps in the front and I suffer from severe anxiety. Now I refuse to go out because I'm embarrassed by my appearance"

"My bridge fell out at the beginning of 2020. I am still without it. This affects my confidence as I am aware of my looks. Cannot smile, laugh"

"Dentist waiting times are ridiculous. I am still waiting for cap to be re-fitted as it constantly falls out due to poor fitting first time around. I cannot apply for a job with front tooth missing as its impacting on confidence. Been told by dentist I am on a very long list"

"A part of tooth chipped off but because I wasn't in pain, they refused to see me for about 6 months. Now they say they can't fill the tooth as the decay is too bad so I'm going to have to lose the tooth soon. At 44 years old that's going to be a major blow to my confidence"

Secondary (hospital) dental services

One young person shared their poor experience with hospital dental services during the pandemic.

“In October 2019 I was referred to the hospital maxillofacial department to remove an impacted tooth as soon as possible as there was a possibility it would grow into the tooth next to it. After waiting 4 months (February 2020) I had my first appointment which was a consultation. I was told it would be removed ASAP as the impacted tooth was not yet touching the one next to it, therefore I would be able to salvage it. However, the Covid emergency happened and all appointments were cancelled. I tried to ring the department in the hospital multiple times, to which I was told I would get a phone call back from the dentist. I didn't hear anything from anyone until around May 2021, almost 2 years later. I received a letter asking if I still wanted to go through with my surgery. I confirmed, sent the letter back, and heard nothing again. For almost 2 years, the impacted tooth and the one next to it got more painful. I rung my usual dentist to see if they could do anything about the pain. After an X-ray, it turned out that the tooth that was supposed to be salvaged had a massive hole in it where the impacted tooth had grown into it and caused it to chip away and decay. Therefore, I had to have a tooth extraction. I have already had orthodontic work done once, however I am going to have to have it again and maybe even pay privately for it, as I will be turning 18 soon”

Equalities – impact on vulnerable groups

Children

We heard how children were suffering because of a lack of timely dental care.

“I have struggled to get routine appointments for my 3 children to have check-ups since the pandemic started. They were given an appointment which was cancelled at short notice. My eldest son turned 18 at the end of August and the dental surgery were reluctant to give him an appointment. They did agree to see my son at the same time as my other two children. All were seen nearly two and a half years after they were last seen. My son was given an x-ray which showed a decayed tooth caused by another tooth occluding it. The tooth now needs to be extracted. This situation could have been avoided had he been seen sooner”

“Numerous appointments cancelled for my son who has now been diagnosed with an enamel problem. So, 18 months of missed treatment”

“Appointment due April 2020, the first week of the pandemic. I still haven't managed to secure an appointment for the children”

Some parents said their children were yet to see a dentist and were worried this may lead to anxiety later in life.

"My son is almost 3 and has never seen a dentist, which might cause fear in later childhood"

Long-term effects

Parents and grandparents worried about the longer-term effects of children not being able to access dental appointments to help keep their teeth healthy.

"My daughter is 5 and a half and hasn't seen a dentist since before she was 2, now at a critical time of dental health as she starts to lose her baby teeth"

"I'm very concerned that my children's teeth haven't been checked for almost 2 years now and any treatment they may need has been delayed"

"Children's teeth will be in a terrible state if dentists continue not to see NHS patients for routine care"

Some parents felt they had no option but to go abroad, to ensure their child had access to timely dental care.

"I have now flown us both out to the Canary Islands for treatment as for a child to have to go several years without even a check-up is unacceptable!"

Chronic Conditions

People with chronic conditions were also struggling to access regular dental check-ups, which were important in managing their conditions.

"My husband has a heart condition. We were told that he needs his teeth checked every 6 months to ensure his heart condition does not worsen. How can we ensure this when our dentist has failed to do any check-ups. Should they have directed us elsewhere?"

Affordability

The cost of dental care was a real barrier for different groups of people, such as personal carers, those on low incomes and families.

"I am unable to access any NHS services in my area and cannot afford to pay for private care"

"I'm an unpaid caregiver for my disabled wife and not able to afford the private options some practices have offered me"

"Working part time and still can't access dental treatment without paying an unaffordable amount"

"As an NHS worker I appreciate the pressures we have all been under but I am desperately unhappy with my dental surgery. If I had enough money, I would pay privately"

"I can just about afford to pay this, but many will not, leaving thousands of children without dental check-ups. This is why there are so many children presenting at A&E with dental conditions"

We heard how a family, paying for UK healthcare as part of their immigration application, are struggling to afford the costs of dental care.

“Me and my 20-year-old son are working full time and paying national insurance like anybody else. However due to our 10-year route settlement, we are also paying the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) which has risen to nearly £1500 each year for both of us. Of course, no one else will know this except the person who receives the money. This has left our family deprived of basic need as we save money to feed this unending demand every year. I raise this year because even after all those NHS payments, the Dentist still wants us to pay for any service given. My son has paid £92 and £39 pounds in his last two visits. Is this something the NHS is aware of? Now I’m scared of going to the dentist because I will be charged - money which will reduce my savings to pay the HIS”

Loss of free dental care

Pregnant women and new mothers told us they were unable to take advantage of free dental care because of a lack of appointments.

"I'm entitled to free NHS dental care as I'm pregnant but tried 6 different practices and was told all were not taking NHS patients and that it was unlikely I would give get to the top of the waiting list before I had my baby."

"I had a baby 11 months ago and have just managed to get a dental appointment, despite having bad sensitivity due to weakened enamel through pregnancy. I think it is a real shame that so many women are missing their free dental treatment due to babies being born during the pandemic. I've now missed mine so will have to pay for treatment and I know a number of women that have been the same."

"My NHS dentist has only been seeing emergency patients since March 2020, not routine. During this time, I have had a baby and would have had free dental care"

"I now have a 9-and-a-half-month-old baby & have not been able to register with an NHS dentist for the duration of my pregnancy or during maternity leave, when I was supposed to be entitled to free dental care"

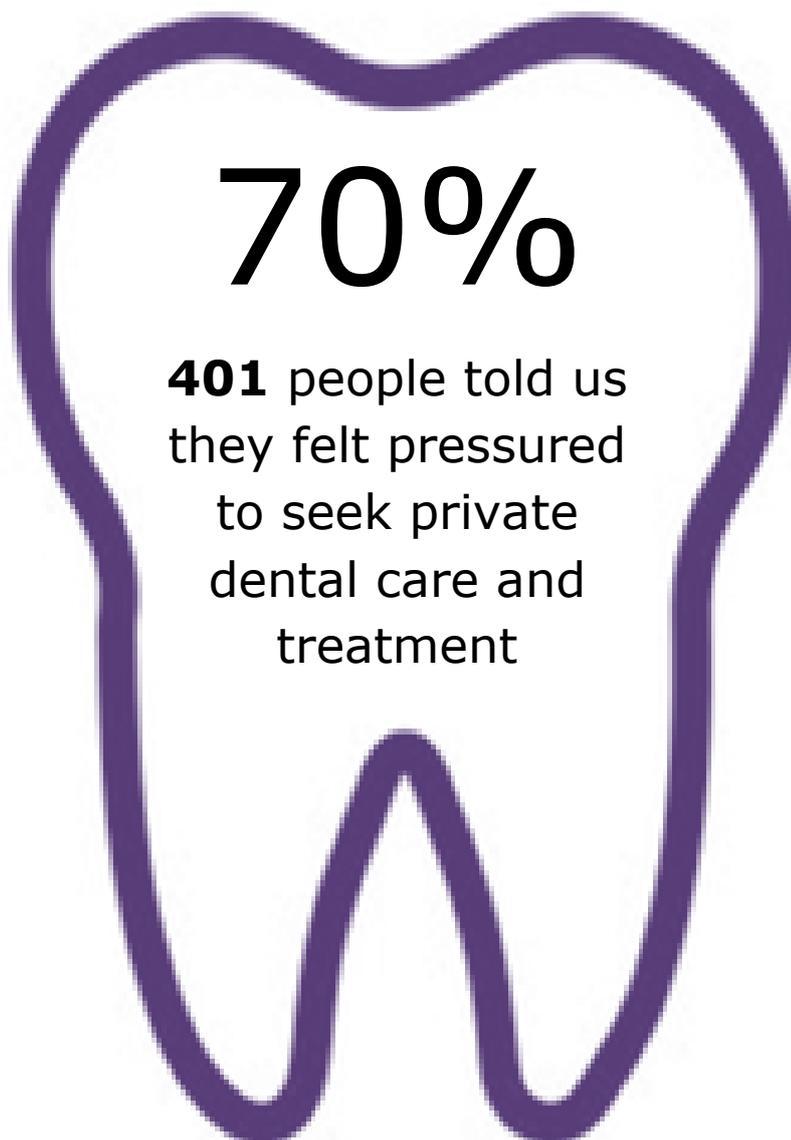
Exploring public feeling

As well as looking at the stories shared with us through the Board of CHC's national survey, we also created a separate online poll asking people whether or not they felt pressured to seek private care and treatment.

Results of Online Poll

573 people responded to our 'quick poll' online. Most people (70%) told us they felt pressured to seek private care and treatment.

People's comments can be found on the next page.



Pressure to go private

When people could not access NHS care, they told us they felt forced to pay for private treatment instead.

“It has been impossible to access any kind of NHS dental care since the pandemic. This has resulted in private dental care. Children have also had no dental care”

Putting Private patients first

We heard how some dentists were saying they could not provide NHS treatment but would see patients if they paid private costs instead. This led people to believe dentists prioritised private care.

“If you’re private they will see you which is really unfair!”

“I asked if I would be seen quicker if I was on the dental plan and was told, “Maybe”! So much for the NHS!”

“I have been unable to get my 8-year old’s teeth checked for well over a year. I can however get her seen privately for £70. I am lucky that I can afford this, but many people cannot...”

“No check-ups for me, my 2 young children or my elderly mum since November 2019 despite paying every month via Denplan. Dentist said they could only see us when out of tier 2. Still no appointment. My auntie, who pays privately, has had 3 check-ups and seen the hygienist during that time so do not understand how they can do it for some but not for others”

Parents also believed that practices were putting private patients first for routine care, ahead of children.

“Have been unable to book a routine check-up for myself or my children for over a year. Dentist informed me they are only doing private routine check-ups, not NHS”

“No NHS appointments with my dentist for my children since covid in March 2020. My husband and I have both had numerous private appointments over the same period. They refuse to treat NHS patients. Have been told they will attempt to see them a minimum 2 years after last appointment. So, my kids won't have seen a dentist for over 2 years, despite repeated requests”

One parent told us that a dental practice was willing to take on her children as NHS patients as long as the parent registered as a private patient.

“The only way I could register my children with a dentist was to agree to a private plan for me - £15 per month, which covers 2 check-ups and 2 hygienist appointments a year. This is 5 times what I was paying at my previous dentist. I have no choice as it's the only way I can get a dentist appointment for my children”

A number of people told us that some practices have encouraged them to become private patients. People are telling us they are frustrated that they have not been able to access NHS dental care.

“Why have I paid 35 years contributions to NHS and can't have dental treatment? My dentist was pushing me to go private for past 3 or 4 years. Why do I have to? I cannot afford it and should not have to, to get an appointment. I am seriously considering treatment abroad if this is my only option. I feel very angry about this”

Accessibility

We heard how some disabled people struggled to find the support they needed to access dental services. One person did not know whether their practice was deaf friendly.

“I volunteer with a lady who is in a wheelchair and deaf. She has a dentist appointment soon as she has lost a tooth. I am in work on the day she needs to go. Trying to find community transport for her in a pandemic has been a nightmare. She needs somebody to wheel her out of her house and help her into the car. None of the council services or charities I contacted could offer this initially. Luckily a very kind lady at Gower Community Transport has said she will do it. Absolutely bonkers that our society and services are so inaccessible to wheelchair users. What are the chances there will be a speaker of British Sign Language (BSL) at the dentist appointment?”

De-registered – removed from practice 'list'

When people have tried to book a dentist appointment after a long gap since their last visit, they have been informed by the practice that they cannot because they have been “removed” from the surgery list for not making an appointment sooner.

“I have been extremely ill and sadly was de-registered from my usual NHS practice and they will not see me”

“I haven't been to my dentist for some time. Primarily because I had spinal surgery and more recently of course they haven't been seeing anyone because of Covid. Two weeks ago I phoned for an urgent appointment because I had toothache only to be informed that I wasn't registered and they couldn't help. I had been with my dentist for 35 years”

“Unfortunately, the dentist we were registered with had unregistered us all due to no fault of our own.”

Families are angry that children have also been removed from practice lists because they had not attended in the last year, despite not being able to get an appointment in the first place.

“My 3 granddaughters, aged 6, 5 and 4, have been struck off because they haven't been seen in a year, and the reason they have not been seen is because the practice is not doing NHS check-ups. I feel totally disgusted with the whole situation, more so for my granddaughters”

Communication

Lack of information

When appointments were cancelled during the pandemic, people told us practices did not always offer them another date. People were left unsure about when they might get to see their dentist again.

“Cancelled my appointment in March 2020 & I haven't been able to make one since”

“Are routine check-ups now happening? Some are getting check-ups, some are not. My children have not had a check-up since the August 2019 and were due a check-up in March 2020. Nothing is said about check-ups in the news”

Being open and honest

People feel that relevant information is missing or not logged about dental services, to show the extent of dental access problems locally.

“There is no data on how many people cannot get a NHS dentist. It is not compulsory for dentists to keep a record of how many people are contacting them to ask for a NHS dentist. Dentist receptionists stated they have people ringing every day”

Positive feedback

It is important to note that some people who fed back about dental care said something positive. One NHS patient had a very different experience and has been able to continue with treatment.

"I had a tooth break earlier this year, leaving root canal filling exposed. A dentist phoned me to ascertain the problem, I was given an appointment within 2 days where the tooth was assessed. As a repair would involve filling, I was given an appointment for the following week to enable the staff to be prepared in full PPE. This went ahead with no issues and I felt very safe (Covid) throughout the whole experience. I have since had 4 appointments to continue treatment and repair that had been due to start pre Covid. I am extremely happy with all of this and I am an NHS patient"

Another told us they had a positive experience when they received timely urgent dental care.

"I had an abscess early during the first lockdown which was extremely painful! My dentist in [] were amazing. I had treatment via video calls and medication prescribed and the prescription sent to my local chemist to enable me to pick up antibiotics. Excellent support and I was very grateful!"

Covid-19 safety measures

Others told us they felt reassured by safety measures in place at practices, to keep them safe.

“When I went to the appointment, I was impressed with their assessment and Covid processes”

“Great communication. Explained distancing and PPE requirements and covid procedures”

Emergency treatment – Out of Hours (111)

We heard how some people were unable to access urgent dental care appointments when they called the 111 service. People experienced lengthy waits to get through by telephone while some were informed that there was no service available on the day they called.

“Had a tooth removed Thursday afternoon. The Friday was a bank holiday. I was left in agony. I phoned 111 to be told there was no emergency appointment so had no choice to go to A&E because the pain was so bad. Went to A&E where a doctor told me more and more people are going to A&E for dental pain as they can’t get appointments”

“[called] 111 three weeks ago on a Sunday. On the telephone for 4 hours, could not get 111 to answer. Go on the Monday, my husband had an infection, had to take antibiotics for a week. Could not get dental or medical to answer. Kept saving high volume of calls”

“111 said no emergency NHS dentist on a Sunday when I was in pain”
“(Sunday) out of hours and in severe pain with tooth. Rung my own NHS dentist number and recorded message advised to ring 111. Spent ages trying to get through to speak to someone. When I eventually spoke to someone, I was not offered anything in terms of pain management or offered an appointment, was just given a number to call the following morning which when I called they told me as I was registered with my own dentist I would need to go back to them. Very poor service”

We heard how the range of treatments when using the NHS 111 emergency service, was limited, with one patient being offered a tooth extraction rather than treatment that might save the tooth.

“I have been on the waiting list for a dentist since 8 months before the first lockdown. I have had to use the out of hours service twice and they refused to do anything other than just remove the teeth when I was told they could have actually been saved. Now I have 2 noticeable gaps in the front and I suffer from severe anxiety anyway but now I refuse to go out because I’m embarrassed by my appearance. I have looked into private care, but I could not afford those prices”

Mixed Messages

People felt let down when services provided them with incorrect information.

"I have been desperately trying to find an NHS dentist as I require urgent treatment. I have phoned Swansea Bay Health Board to be told to phone 111, and 111 told me to phone Swansea Bay Health Board! I have been reduced to tears by this experience, and I still require dental treatment - I cannot afford private treatment"

People's suggestions for how to improve dental services for patients

Many people shared their views on what they felt could help improve dental services for local people, particularly access. A number of information and communication-related suggestions were made as a means to improving services and patient experience. Others shared more system wide ideas. We have summarised the feedback received as follows:

Recovery of dental services

People told us they felt frustrated that despite the reopening of services in June 2020, NHS dental services continue to be difficult to access.

"I work for the NHS in a hospital outpatient cancer unit! We have stayed open. Why is it that dentists and doctors are refusing to see patients making it extra difficult for everyone? Open up! Covid restrictions are not the same now as in 2020 but they are still behaving the same way!"

"Make the dentists provide a service and stop hiding behind Covid!"

Address inequalities in access

People want practices to treat NHS patients the same as private patients.

"I think that everyone should be treated equally and that NHS patients should still be getting check-ups and dental treatment as well as private patients"

"Ensure NHS Dentists cannot refuse to treat patients not assigned to their practice in an emergency. Also, it's despicable that NHS dental practices will treat privately but not those in need. The poor and disabled cannot travel miles away to get treatment. Why not build a new NHS dental school and treatment practice in the locality to cover the shortage"

"Treat all patients the same, whether NHS or private"

Make children and young people a priority

"Support dentists to get children's appointments restarted PLEASE Get teams in ALL SWANSEA (not just deprived areas) primary school with dental care kits and advice for children".

"Prioritise older children and teenagers to get their check-ups. They have to look after teeth that are supposed to be lasting their forever!"

"Don't leave 5-year-olds in pain"

One person would like to see practices better help those patients who do not have good access to transport.

"Remember those who still need support and are very isolated. Those who still need physical contact and support to get to services. Every time the lady I volunteer with has needed support through this pandemic, the response has been, "we can't do that at the moment". I have then, as an individual, stepped up because the support for isolated, disabled individuals isn't out there"

Provide better information

People feel that the health board should be providing up-to-date information for people about which practices are taking on NHS patients and how they can access dental care.

"Have the list available of NHS dentists that are taking on patients"

"There should be a central list of places accepting NHS patients"

"Provide people with up-to-date information, about what you can and can't get in these times. Routine check-ups may not be available but what is?"

Increase NHS capacity

People would also like to see more NHS dentists employed and opening hours extended for dental practices, to tackle the backlog.

“More funding, more NHS dentists”

“Dentists should be open 7 days a week, and later in the evening to see more patients”

“Hospital staff had to work extra hours over the pandemic so why not dentists?”

Incentives to see more NHS patients

People feel that the Health Board needs to find ways to ensure dentists are seeing NHS patients.

“Try and get more dentist to take on NHS patients”

“Provide more NHS dentist or at least pay dentists better so they want to work for the NHS rather than privately”

“Dentists need to open more NHS spaces. There are nowhere near enough to cover the number of patients and going private is just too expensive”

“There should be targets for dentists to meet when it comes to the number of regular check-ups, these should be prioritised over other services that are less urgent such as teeth whitening etc”

Improve emergency dental access - NHS 111

“Emergency dental services for NHS patients are very poor and seriously need to be reviewed. 111 is not a suitable number to use for emergency dental care so I think a separate line / number should be available to speed the process up”

Learning from what we heard

The stories shared with us illustrate the scale of the challenge for many people across Neath Port Talbot and Swansea who are trying to access NHS dental care and treatment.

Positive experiences were shared by a small minority of patients and reflected:

- ☺ experiences of dental care
- ☺ appropriate safety measures in place to support patients
- ☺ Good communication from dental practices, again in providing reassurance and information

The negative feedback far outweighed the positive feedback with a significant number of people telling us they were experiencing difficulties accessing NHS dental services. The stories shared provide a rich picture of repeated telephone calls to dental practices in the search for one taking on NHS patients. People were told that practices were not taking on patients or that there were no NHS appointments available.

People perceive that access, however, is available if the person can pay for private treatment. This puts low-income households at greater risk of missing out on treatment where only private appointments are available.

We are concerned to learn that some vulnerable groups in the community, including informal carers, women in pregnancy, new

mothers, children, and people with a disability or chronic conditions, are struggling to access dental care.

Pregnant women and new mothers reported being unable to take advantage of free dental care because of a lack of appointments and an inability to 'register' with a practice.

We are alarmed that people's feedback shows that children and young people are missing out on dental treatment. Young children are putting up with painful symptoms while some have sadly lost teeth because problems were picked up too late.

Parents are struggling to find practices that will take on children as NHS patients with some worried about their child's oral health as they cannot get check-ups or preventative treatment. Some parents told us they believe some dental practices are using unfair tactics with parents, saying they will take on a child as an NHS patient as long as the parent registers as a private patient for a monthly fee.

We heard about the different ways that access issues can affect people. The personal impact described by some people who did not have good access to dental services was sometimes significant, with stories of people being left in pain and being unable to eat. One person pulled out their own teeth.

A lack of dental care is causing people's mental well-being to suffer too, with many telling us their self-confidence has been knocked.

It is clear from the stories shared with us and other Community Health Council's across Wales, that NHS dental capacity is insufficient to meet demand. Indeed, we have seen significant increases in the

number of people engaging with us over dental access over the past 4 years.

Inevitably, the pandemic has had an impact with practices initially closed and then seeing fewer patients. However, our findings in this report are not new - problems accessing an NHS dentist significantly pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic.

The lack of information and signposting about which dental practices are accepting NHS patients is a cause of frustration for many people and the CHC feel strongly that the burden of locating a practice accepting new NHS patients, should not rest with local people.

These stories are a powerful reminder to those responsible for planning and delivering dental services of the increased risks of dental complications because of long waits for treatment and difficulty accessing dental treatment. Additional frustration is caused when communication is poor and information is lacking.

Our report draws conclusions from the views and experiences shared with us and makes recommendations based on these. We recognise that services had to adapt quickly during the pandemic. The recommendations suggest ways to improve patient experience based on what people have told us.

Recommendations

Our 2020 report, 'NHS Dental Services across Swansea Bay Health Board: A Report on Patient Experience', found similar issues to those identified in the present report. People's more recent experiences do not show improvement, particularly in relation to access, which has worsened during the pandemic. However, access to NHS dental care was highlighted as a major issue before COVID-19 as our 2020 report confirms.

We reiterate several recommendations in our 2020 report, a copy of which can be found on our website:

<https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/> or by request. Please see our contact details at the end of this report.

People's feedback suggests that the following areas require further work, to help address some of the broader issues facing patients:

1. Increasing the flexibility of dental commissioning
 - a. In response to changing local needs and
 - b. to tackle the backlog caused by the pandemic
2. Ensure that patients get the information they need about:
 - a. oral health
 - b. the treatments they can get on the NHS
 - c. how to give feedback or make a complaint
3. Out of Hours (OOH's) Emergency Dental Service:
 - a. Continue to gather feedback from the general public about their experiences of all dental care including patients'

experiences of seeking advice from NHS 111 about dental problems

4. Accessibility - There are legal duties under the Equality Act 2010, to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to deliver equality of access to healthcare services for disabled people. We recommend that dental practices across the Swansea Bay Health Board area consider the following actions:
 - a. Undertake an audit of disabled facilities and aids and ensure information is regularly updated on practice websites. This will provide people who may use the site to look for an accessible dentist with current information
 - b. All practices should work towards the full implementation of the Accessibility Information Standard, to ensure patients have access to the communication support they need. This should include the provision of hearing loops, access to BSL interpreters and access to information in an alternative format
 - c. In the instance that a person is not able to get to their dental practice because of a disability or medical condition, the dentist should refer the patient to a more specialised dental service, e.g. community dental services

Questions for Swansea Bay Health Board to address

1. Does the Health Board collect information about how many people are waiting for dental treatment across the Swansea Bay Health Board area?
 - a. If not, why not?
 - b. If this information is collected:
 - i. How many of these people are actually on dental waiting lists?
 - ii. How many people are unable to get on to a dental waiting list?
2. The Health Board are telling people to telephone practices in the area to find out if they are taking on NHS patients and to ask to be added to a practice waiting list. Many people told us they are calling all the practices as instructed but are being informed that they are not currently taking on NHS patients. They are also not being offered the opportunity to be added to a waiting list. Why is this happening?
3. Access - It is clear that services are not meeting local demand for NHS dental care:
 - a. What is the total contracted patient capacity within the Health Board area?
 - b. Is there enough NHS dental capacity commissioned across Swansea Bay to meet demand?
 - c. How will the Health Board deal with the demand and ensure those without a dentist have access to NHS care?
 - d. What resources will be provided to:

- i. reduce the backlog of patients causing waiting times to become longer?
 - ii. to turn around what has now become an increasing problem within the area?
4. Why are some dental practices prioritising extra capacity for patients on their waiting lists to be seen sooner if they become private patients?
5. Given that many people informed us that they have been given little choice but to pay privately for treatment, what are the implications in terms of establishing the true picture of local demand for NHS dental care?
6. What is the Health Board doing to ensure patients within vulnerable groups, such as children, pregnant women, new mums, immigrants, individuals with low income and those with chronic conditions, are getting the treatment they are entitled to?
7. Access to urgent dental care: what measures will be taken to improve access to urgent dental care through NHS 111?
8. With regards to issues highlighted at points 1 to 7 above, what are the arrangements in place for monitoring dental contractors?
 - a. The CHC asks that the Health Board works with dental contractors to:
 - b. Carry out EIAs in respect of dental services
 - c. Develop an action plan to address inequalities identified by the assessment
 - d. Share its action plan in relation to the EIA with the CHC

What next?

Swansea Bay Community Health Council will continue to monitor and report back on experiences of NHS Dental services in Neath Port Talbot & Swansea.

We and other Community Health Council's across Wales will continue to call on Welsh Government and NHS Wales to speed up dental contract reform and tackle the underlying problems of dental access for all people across Wales.

Thank you

We thank everyone who has continued to share their experiences with us about seeking dental care over the past 12 months.

We would like to thank our partner organisations for sharing information and our questionnaire and for supporting us to access seldom heard groups.

We hope the feedback people have taken time to share influences decision makers to take action where they need to, as quickly as they can, to make things better.

Feedback

Swansea Bay CHC would love to hear what you think about this publication, and any suggestions about how we could have improved it, so we can use this to make our future work better.



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If you write to us in Welsh, we will answer in Welsh. This will not lead to a delay in responding to your correspondence.

We welcome telephone calls in Welsh.

**Swansea Bay
Community Health Council**