



## A Review of Access to North Somerset NHS Dental Services May 2015

### Background

One of the key issues that people in North Somerset discuss with Healthwatch North Somerset is difficulties experienced accessing NHS dental services, in particular in areas outside of Weston-super-Mare.

It was also highlighted that there are particular difficulties in accessing treatment for people who have disabilities and are unable to leave their homes.

As a result of intelligence received from the public, Healthwatch North Somerset decided to investigate and evaluate access to NHS dental service provision in North Somerset.

### What we did

We collated all of the intelligence received from the public about NHS dental services in North Somerset. Some of these comments are shown below:

*“I felt my dental experience was lacking in care and quite traumatic”.*

*“I have an illness which means I cannot leave the house, when I phoned 111 due to dental pain I was advised I must attend at a dental surgery”.*

*“I live in Backwell and it is impossible to find a local NHS dentist”.*

*“All of the dentists in Nailsea are private”.*

*“I cannot find an NHS dentist in Portishead who will take my family”.*

It was decided that the best and most accurate way to understand the difficulties faced by members of the public when seeking access to NHS dental services was to act as a Secret Shopper. This method would allow us to simulate the experience of a patient, and enable a viable evaluation.

In May 2015 Healthwatch North Somerset conducted a Secret Shopper exercise. During this time, we phoned each dental practice in North Somerset and phoned the 111 service, as they provide information on local NHS dentists and emergency appointments.

We sought to find out if:

1. The dental surgery accepted NHS patients
2. The dental surgery were taking new NHS patients.
3. How and where the dental surgery signposted the public if they could not provide an NHS dental service.

## The Secret Shopper Survey

Healthwatch North Somerset phoned all 27 dental surgeries within North Somerset that were found on the NHS Choices website. We asked the dental surgeries whether they accepted NHS patients and if they were currently taking on new NHS patients. We found that:

- 18 dental surgeries advertised on NHS Choices that they accept NHS patients but when called, only 10 stated they were taking on new patients.
- Of these, 7 were based outside of Weston-super-Mare and three within Weston-super-Mare.
- When telephoned 3 of the 18 practices that advertised on NHS Choices that they were taking NHS patients, advised they did not accept new adult patient's - only children (under 18 years old).
- Of the 18 surgeries we called that said they accepted NHS patients, 3 informed us that, although they were taking NHS patients, an appointment could not be made for more than a month; 1 surgery offered to add us onto the waiting list but could not estimate how long we would have to wait.
- The remaining 9 practices that were on the NHS Choices website advised they were not taking NHS patients at the time of our phone call.

All the dental practices we contacted signposted patients to the NHS Choices website for further information about NHS dentists in North Somerset.

We contacted the NHS England Area Team for North Somerset about their processes for keeping details of access to NHS dental services up to date for the public. We were informed that the 111 service is provided with up to date information about which dental practices in North Somerset are accepting NHS patients.

We made a Secret Shopper phone call to the 111 service to ask where we could find an NHS Dentist using our Nailsea office postcode. We were given the details of four dental surgeries which were taking new NHS patients: 2 in Clevedon, 1 in Cleeve and 1 in Long Ashton. We phoned each of these dentists to check and were advised 3 out of the 4 were taking NHS patients at that time.

## Freedom of Information request (FOI)

Healthwatch North Somerset made a Freedom of Information request to the NHS England Dental Area Team. E-mail and phone contact with the team consistently directed us to the NHS Choices website, which we knew was displaying some incorrect information. We asked them to provide the following information:

1. Details of NHS dental practices in North Somerset.
2. Details of dental practices that are currently taking on new NHS patients in North Somerset.

The FOI response received from NHS England advised that we could find this information on the NHS Choices website, advising *“Each dental practice’s page on the website details whether or not they are currently taking on new NHS patients”*. (See Appendix 1).

## NHS Choices

*NHS Choices is the UK’s biggest health website. It provides a comprehensive health information service. The website helps you make choices about your health, from decisions about your lifestyle, such as smoking, drinking and exercise, to finding and using NHS services in England.* (Taken from NHS Choices website [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)).

We re-investigated the NHS Choices website before sending the Freedom of Information request and found that out of the 27 dental practices in North Somerset that advertised they were taking NHS patients:

- 12 did not specify on their NHS Choices page if they took NHS patients.
- 1 surgery indicated they were taking NHS patients - but when we phoned they advised they were not.
- 1 surgery showed they were taking NHS patients - but when we phoned they informed us there was a very long waiting list and were unable to estimate when an appointment could be arranged.

- 3 surgeries said they did not take NHS patients but when we phoned informed us they only accepted children under 18 years old.
- 8 were accurately displaying they accepted NHS patients
- 2 were accurately displaying they did not accept NHS patients.

When we investigated further, we found that the dental practices have individual responsibility for keeping their own details and pages updated on the NHS Choices website.

## Accessing a dentist - Out of Hours

As well as advising patients where and when they can access a NHS dentist, the NHS Choices website provides information about what a patient should do if they need urgent treatment when a dental surgery is closed. As there will be times when patients need dental advice quickly it is important that this information is displayed clearly and can be found easily.

We checked each of the North Somerset dental practices on NHS Choices to find out where patients were signposted to Out of Hours.

We found:

- Only 7 practices displayed the correct Out of Hours information to phone 111.
- 13 practices showed an incorrect phone number for the NHS Dental Helpline which has now been closed and replaced by the 111 service.
- 5 practices did not offer any phone number for Out of Hours.
- 2 dental practices signposted patients to the Somerset Dental Advice Line.

## Access to an NHS dentist when housebound

There are some people in North Somerset who are unable to attend a dental surgery due to disability or a medical condition. In this situation an NHS dentist should be able refer them to a specialist community dental service for assistance.

Healthwatch North Somerset spoke to two patients who were unable to leave their homes and had needed a dentist to visit them. The patients found there appeared to be a gap in knowledge for dental referrals. Both patients had phoned their dental surgeries and were advised “this is not something we do”.

Patient One was advised to phone the 111 service. When they contacted the 111 service they were informed if they could not attend a dental surgery then no one would be able to help. The patient then contacted Healthwatch North Somerset who advised that the 111 service should be able to provide this information. We then made a phone call to 111 on behalf of the patient. The advisor explained that 111 could provide the patient with relevant information to access specialist community dental services and apologised for the incorrect information previously

given. The 111 advisor asked for the patient to phone back and they would discuss options directly with the patient.

Patient Two was advised to contact their GP by the dental practice and the GP surgery advised them to contact University Hospitals Bristol (UHB). UHB were able to provide a copy of the service specification for their Primary Care Dental Service Special Care Treatment Team. This specification explained who can receive treatment at home and advised the patient to contact the Dental Help Line 0845 120 6680. When the patient phoned this number the patient was directed to phone 111 for assistance.

Healthwatch North Somerset asked the 111 service provider Care UK how this service was being advertised to the public. Care UK contacted the commissioners directly and were advised that leaflets have been distributed to GP Practices, Dental Practices, Pharmacies, Opticians and libraries providing information on how to access dental services.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Our investigation shows that the main areas of concern are the NHS Choices website which contains out of date and misleading information and the 111 service which provided incorrect information.

Patients should expect current and up to date information when using NHS Choices and not have to work their way through a list of dentists in North Somerset in the hope one might take on new NHS patients.

Healthwatch North Somerset recommends:

1. NHS England and North Somerset dental practices develop a protocol to work together to ensure the dentist information on NHS Choices website is maintained, up to date and accurate.
2. The 111 service have access to accurate and up to date dental service information in North Somerset to enable them to fulfil their signposting role.
3. NHS England investigate ways to inform people with a disability or medical condition who are housebound, about how to access a NHS dentist if required.

**This service evaluation was completed in May 2015 and we acknowledge that service information may have since been updated and that some changes may have been made.**

## Appendix 1

### **Re: Freedom of Information request**

Thank you for your Freedom of Information (FOI) request dated 22 July 2014.

Your exact request was:-

“We are seeking the following up to date information from you:

1. Details of NHS dental practices in North Somerset
2. Details of dental practices that are currently taking on new NHS patients in North Somerset
3. Details of dental practice premises in North Somerset providing disabled access
4. Details of the number of North Somerset children who were referred to the Bristol Hospitals for dental treatment.

Could you please provide this data for the period covering April 2013 – April 2014?”

NHS England holds this information.

However, as some of the information is in the public domain, we will under Section 21 of the FOI Act (information accessible to the applicant by other means) refer you to the published source.

With regards to Questions 1-3, this information is available via the Area Team’s page on the NHS Choices website. Each dental practice’s page on the website details whether or not they are currently taking on new NHS patients and whether or not they provide disabled access:- <http://www.nhs.uk/Services/Trusts/Dentists/DefaultView.aspx?id=89768>

With regards to Question 4, there were a total of 1,235 patients aged 0-15 years old referred for dental treatment in this period and 261 patients aged 16-18 years old.

I hope this information is helpful. However, if you are dissatisfied, you have the right to ask for an internal review by writing to us, within two months of the date of this letter, to:

NHS England  
PO Box 16738  
REDDITCH  
B97 9PT

To: Eileen Jacques  
Chief Officer  
Healthwatch North Somerset

South Plaza  
Marlborough Street  
Bristol  
BS1 3NX

Email address – Maxine.quantrill@nhs.net

Telephone Number – 07824 451261

Date 20<sup>th</sup> July 2015

Dear Eileen

**Re:** “A Review of Access to North Somerset NHS Dental Services May 2015”

We are writing in response to the document entitled “A Review of Access to North Somerset NHS Dental Services May 2015”

With regard to the comments referred to in that report, NHS England can advise that there are 3 NHS practices in Nailsea and each of those practices failed to achieve their targeted activity for the financial year 2014/2015. In Backwell there is one practice offering NHS dental care, again this practice did not achieve its targeted activity for the financial year 2014/15. These practices all have unrestricted nGDS (General Dental Services) Contracts and take children, and both exempt and fee paying adults. The un-utilised activity across these 4 practices equates to availability for in excess of 225 patients.

It is acknowledged by NHS England that NHS dental services in Portishead are more often than not at capacity due to the high number of new houses recently constructed in the town. However, practices are open in Clevedon and Nailsea some 5-6 miles from Portishead.

## The Secret Shopper Survey

It would be useful to NHS England if details of the practices stating that they did not accept new adult patients – only children under 18 years old could be given so that this may be pursued directly with the practices. There are no NHS practices in North Somerset who operate with a restricted contract (children only and exempt only) and all practices that are open to new patients are contractually obliged to take children and adults.

We would not consider it inappropriate for patients to wait up to a month for a routine dental appointment. Appointments are booked with considerable forward planning on behalf of the patients and the practices, and therefore we would not wish to see dental practices operating with spare capacity. This then leads to under performance at the end of the year and restricts dental practices from efficiently managing their contract.

NHS England have noted the points raised around Out of Hours and we will aim to rectify issues around practices either displaying the incorrect phone number or offering no phone number for out of hours.

At the end of the report recommendations have been made. We would respond as follows:

- 1. NHS England and North Somerset dental practices develop a protocol to work together to ensure the dentist information on NHS Choices website is maintained, up to date and accurate.**

NHS England response: These issues have already been escalated by NHS England Dental Team to both the Heads of Primary Care for the South West. We are in discussion with Health and Social Care Information Centre and the Commissioning Support Unit around data quality issues in NHS Choices. It is hoped that these issues can be resolved for the future.

- 2. The 111 service have access to accurate and up to date dental service information in North Somerset to enable them to fulfil their signposting role.**

NHS England response: Primary Care Information System (PCIS) reports are used to inform the Directory of Service that is used by NHS 111. The monthly reports identify changes to contractors and include new and closed practices and changes to address details. However, it does not currently include changes to opening times and patient acceptance policies. These issues have been raised with the PCIS user group to enable the creation of more accurate reporting of changes to service to NHS 111.

**3. NHS England to investigate ways to inform people with a disability or medical condition who are housebound, about how to access an NHS dentist if required.**

NHS England response: All dental practices are aware of the Primary Care Dental Service operated by United Hospitals Bristol which does operate a domiciliary service for housebound patients. NHS England will ensure that in their next newsletter to dental practices a reminder is given in relation to accessing domiciliary services.

Yours sincerely,

Maxine Quantrill

Primary Care Support Team  
NHS England (BNSSSG Area Team)