

healthwatch

Milton Keynes

NHS Dentistry in Milton Keynes



Review of NHS Dentist availability in Milton Keynes 2018



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1 About Healthwatch Milton Keynes

It is our mission to provide the people of Milton Keynes with a strong, independent voice on health and social care issues, and to influence the way these services are planned, provided and delivered.

Healthwatch Milton Keynes is the statutory body that's here to help improve local health and social care services and make sure they work for the people who use them.

We listen to patients' feedback about local services and run projects to collect feedback about specific services or health and social care issues.

We take feedback through our website, phone calls, social media and letters from people who use local services about any issue health and social care issue that affects them. This information guides how we direct our resources.

One of our statutory powers is to 'Enter and View' local health and social care services and review it from the perspective of patients.

We use information gathered through patient feedback, projects and our Enter and View work to write reports and recommendations to service providers and commissioners, letting them know what's working well and what could improve patient experience.

We represent the voice of local people on various health and social care forums, including the Health and Wellbeing Board.

We're part of a national network that reports to NHS England and The Department of Health and Social Care on national health and social care trends.

We also use our knowledge of local health and social care to provide a signposting service.

Established as part of the 2013 Health and Social Care Act, we replaced LINKs (Local Involvement Networks).

2 Why we chose to look at Dentistry in Milton Keynes

Through gathering patient feedback, we noticed a theme concerning access to NHS dentistry in Milton Keynes. We have received questions about how to access NHS dental services in Milton Keynes, what treatment is provided under the NHS, and complaints from people who have been told that the treatment they need would not be covered by the NHS.

We wanted to find out if the issues raised with us were representative of people's experiences accessing NHS dental services across Milton Keynes. This project aimed to gather evidence to find out whether access to NHS funded dentistry is problematic for residents of Milton Keynes.

3 How we carried out the review

To help us gain a better understanding of local NHS dental access, we began with an online comparison of information provided on Dentists' Practice website and NHS Choices. The NHS Choices website contains a directory of information about all NHS service providers in England, including dental practices. The site helps people make informed choices about services, offering information on location (including directions), contact details, opening hours and the types of NHS funded services and treatments provided. The site includes 'star rating' reviews of different NHS services by people who have visited the practice. Although the website is managed by NHS England, dental practices are responsible for keeping their own information up to date. Practices are sent regular email reminders to check their information.

To gather more detailed evidence of patient experience, we designed a survey asking for specific information from people who have used, or tried to use, NHS dental services within the last 12 months. We shared our survey on our website, social media and print newsletter. The survey was also shared in the Citizen newspaper and on local radio, parish councils and widely across our partners and stakeholders in health, social care and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Two members of our volunteer team conducted online research to compare the information each Milton Keynes NHS dental surgery advertised on both NHS Choices and their own websites. The team also contacted all dental practices by phone to find out how complaints were managed, and to check that the online information was accurate.

4 Summary of findings...

Of the twenty-nine (29) NHS dental surgeries in Milton Keynes, we found that fewer than seven (7) of these are currently taking on new NHS patients. Our survey found that two thirds of respondents experienced wait times of a month or more for NHS treatment and dental surgery website information suggests that private patients are given priority.

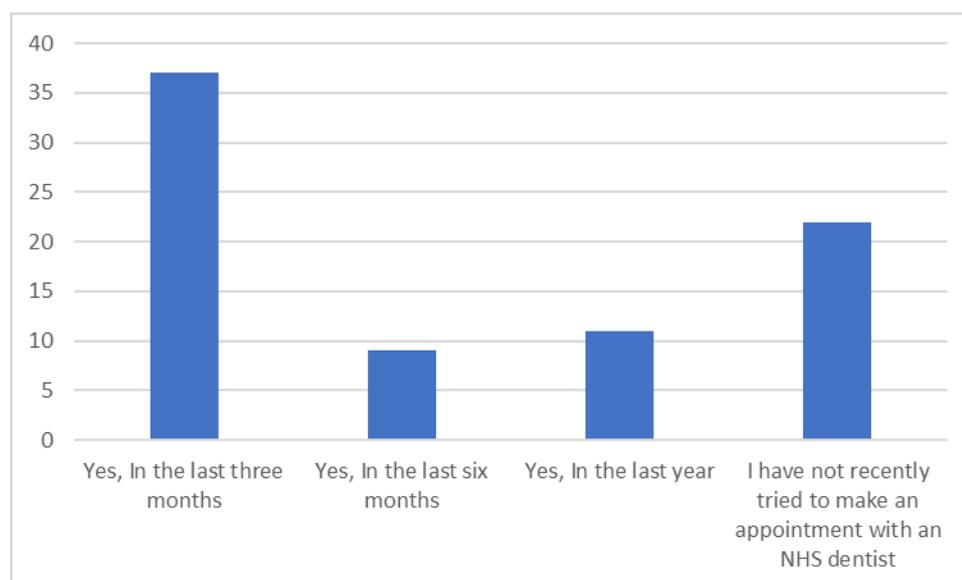
Our review found that access to NHS dentistry is difficult for Milton Keynes residents. The patient feedback we received about the lack of NHS dental treatment available that people sent us, and which led to this review has been confirmed by the evidence gained through our survey and the information gathered from the practices.

Because poor oral health can have serious implications on people's overall health, Healthwatch Milton Keynes will be looking at ways we can ensure that the stories and experiences that people have shared with us can be used to influence and improve access to NHS dental services for the whole community.

5 The Local Picture

5.1 Survey findings

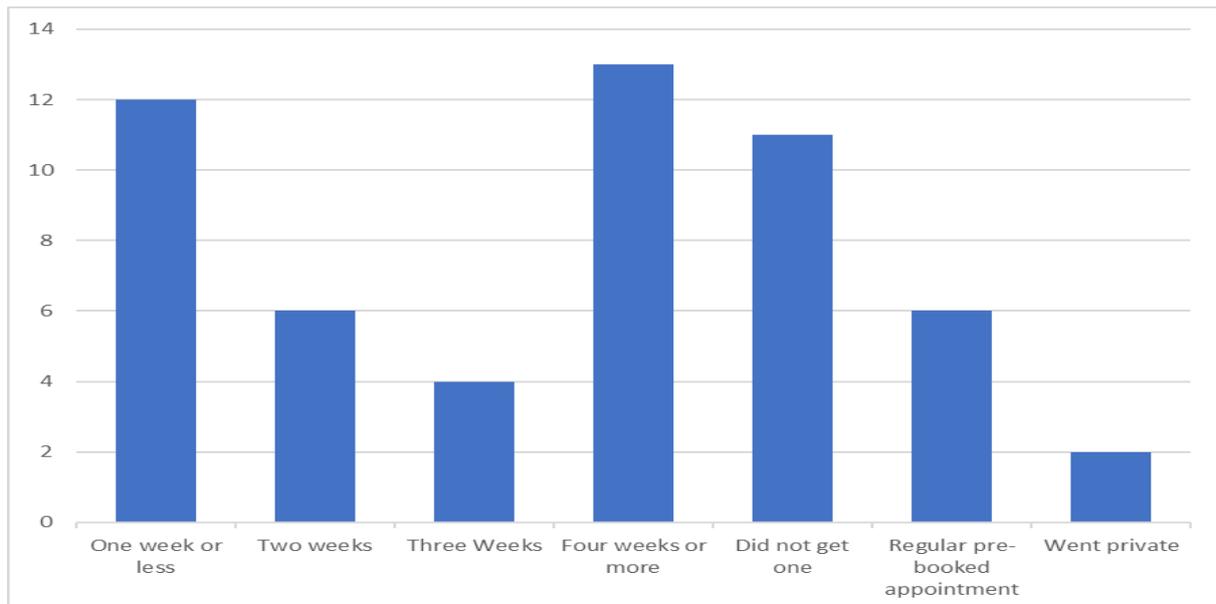
While we had 79 responses to our survey, the information and graphs below may not equal this total as not all respondents answered all questions, depending on their circumstance.



Did you try to get an appointment with a dentist or at a practice you have attended before? Were you referred to a private dentist for all or part of your treatment?

54 people had tried to get an appointment with a dentist or dental practice they had attended previously. While 17 people were referred to private practices, three more people told us that their dentist had gone private, so they became private patients by default. 15 respondents told us that they were unable to find an NHS dentist at all. One person reported that they flew to Thailand for their treatment and, including flights, found it was still cheaper than having their treatment here.

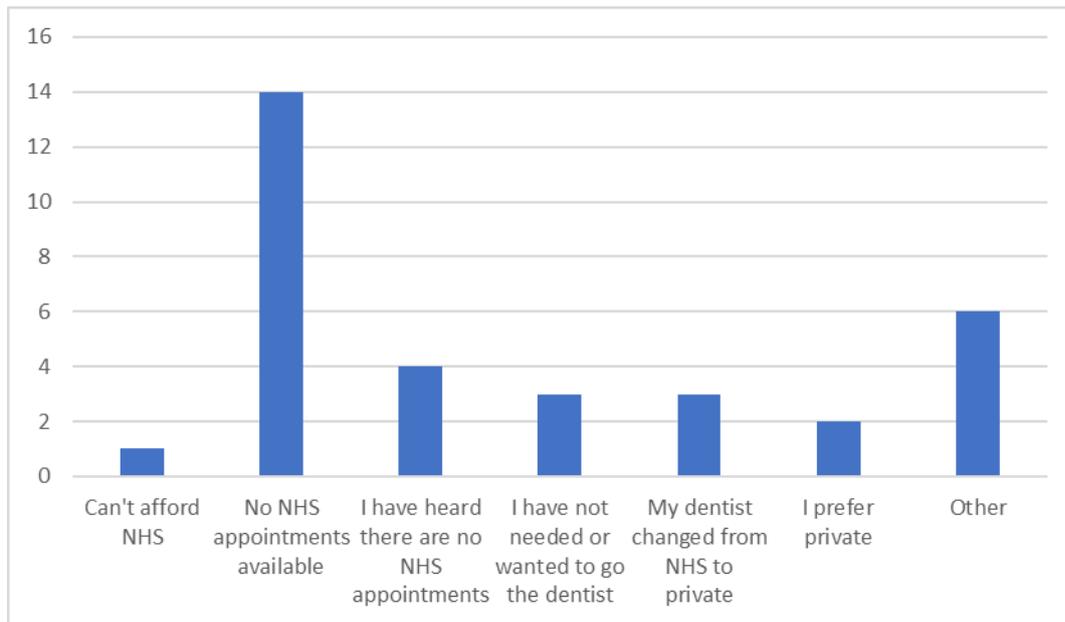
How long did it take to get an appointment with a dentist?



It was encouraging to see 12 people able to gain access to an NHS dentist within one week, however this was largely because they were making emergency appointments for broken teeth or pain. This is compared to the 24 people who either waited over a month or did not get an appointment at all. One respondent told us that they had managed to make an appointment in two months' time, but this was then cancelled by the surgery. Another told us that their appointments were often cancelled by the surgery.

The issue of a lack of reminders for advanced appointments for regular check-ups was raised by a number of people who answered this question. As we have learned, through patient feedback, that missing appointments can lead to removal from a practice list, this can create a barrier to preventative oral health care.

If you have not recently tried to get an appointment with an NHS dentist, why not?



When respondents to this question chose 'other', a common reason reported in the free text box that their NHS dentist made a private referral for a root canal as they was unable to provide the service. Another respondent reported that their NHS dentist had given them such poor treatment that it required a private dentist, at a cost of over £2000, to repair their teeth.

One patient told us that the NHS time slots were too short for their complex periodontal needs, so feel they have to take a private appointment to ensure the necessary appointment length. While they reported being unhappy about the price, they were happy with the results they were getting.

Another patient informed us that, while attending their NHS surgery, they saw a locum who was charging private fees as that dentist was not registered with the surgery.

One respondent reported being unable to afford NHS charges, which, with so few dentists accepting NHS payment exempt patients, effectively denies this person access to dental care.

5.2 NHS Choices information

NHS choices asks dental surgeries to provide information on whether they are currently accepting NHS patients through referral from another dental or health professional, if they are accepting new adult NHS patient registrations, new adult patients entitled to free NHS dental care, and/ or new child patients and whether they are providing urgent NHS appointments.

At the time we reviewed the information on the NHS Choices website, only twelve of the twenty-nine Milton Keynes Dentists advertised on NHS choices had updated all of the information fields. Ten practices had not provided any details at all, and the remainder had only updated one or two of the fields.

Only seven surgeries advised on NHS Choices that they were accepting new adult patients, including those entitled to free NHS dental care, these surgeries were also the only ones offering to accept children as new patients. Fourteen (14) surgeries have said they would accept urgent NHS dental appointments, although it is unclear whether this would apply only to their existing patients as only half of these surgeries advertised that they were accepting new NHS patients.

The most common issue with the information listed by surgeries on the NHS Choices website is that it does not match the information provided on the surgeries own websites. For example, one surgery advertises on NHS Choices that it is accepting new NHS patients, but their own website only has NHS information about the law and NHS contracts in general. The only patient information provided for pricing and appointments, relates to private patients.

When telephoned by our team, all other surgeries advertising on NHS Choices website as accepting NHS patients advised that they were at capacity for NHS patients, or that they were operating a waiting list for NHS patient registration and/ or treatment. This means that although it looks as though there is a healthy provision for NHS dental treatment in Milton Keynes, the reality is that, at the time of this review, there was one dental surgery providing patients with NHS treatment.

Where surgeries advertised that they would accept urgent NHS patient appointments, it was not made clear, on the website or over the phone, whether they were accepting new NHS patients, or if this only applied to existing patients. One of these surgeries advised that they were operating a waiting list for the registration of new NHS patients, but did not clarify how this might affect people needing emergency appointments.

Another important issue to note is that some surgeries are offering NHS treatment only at allotted times. One specialist orthodontist that is accepting referrals from NHS dentists to assess whether a patient's specialist treatment will be covered on the NHS, only offers NHS appointments between 9am and 3pm, with waiting times of up to 21 months to begin treatment, and private appointments being offered much more flexibly within a few weeks. Another surgery's own website states that they are accepting NHS patients, with fewer appointment slots available than for private patients.

We also found that one of the dentists has listed what appears to be their Milton Keynes home address on NHS Choices although their surgery is actually located in Bedfordshire.

5.3 We recommend:

1. While the administration of the webpage has largely been given to the individual surgeries, we would encourage the dentistry commissioning team to carry out regular checks of the accuracy and relevance of the information uploaded.
2. As NHS England have advised that their dentistry page should only advertise surgeries which provide NHS funded treatments, the NHS Choices website loses its value to the public when it does not contain up to date or correct information about which dentists are able to provide NHS dentistry. We suggest that that dentists who are 'at capacity' or otherwise unable to offer NHS treatment are highlighted so those looking for NHS treatment are able to do so easily.
3. Healthwatch Milton Keynes would welcome a review of the measures used by commissioners to establish the needs of the local population. The 2017 NHS Dental Handbook, a guide for commissioners, practices and dentists, produced by the NHS Business Services Authority states that:

"Whilst there has been some improvement in general access over the past few years, commissioners need to ensure that they continue to meet their duties to commission primary care services appropriate to the needs of their populations."

(<https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/2017-05/Dental%20handbook%20%28V1.0%29%20052017.pdf>)

The findings of our review of access to NHS funded dentistry show that primary care services, provided by the current system, are not adequately meeting these needs.

Service provider response

Thank you for sharing the report “NHS Dentistry in Milton Keynes” which has been welcomed by the dental team. It is a really informative report which NHS England will be able to use not just to inform future commissioning arrangements in Milton Keynes, but also to improve the quality of services that are currently available here and elsewhere across the region. I am pleased to provide the following comments in response to the report for the members of Healthwatch Milton Keynes.

1. **While the administration of the webpage has largely been given to the individual surgeries, we would encourage the dentistry commissioning team to carry out regular checks of the accuracy and relevance of the information uploaded.**

Dental practices all have access and editorial rights to their NHS Choices webpage and are expected to keep the site updated. If a webpage is not updated within 90 days the information becomes ‘greyed out’. The dentistry commissioning team has requested all NHS Choices webpages are updated by the end of May and will undertake monitoring checks to ensure they are maintained and accurate. In future we believe that it will be a contractual requirement for practices to keep this information up to date.

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We have written to all dental practices in Milton Keynes asking they address the inaccuracies on their NHS Choices pages. It is envisaged that by prompting and monitoring the updating of NHS Choices dental webpages it will be easier to see which practices are currently accepting new patients at any given time.

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“Whilst there has been some improvement in general access over the past few years, commissioners need to ensure that they continue to meet their duties to commission primary care services appropriate to the needs of their populations.”

The findings of our review of access to NHS funded dentistry show that primary care services, provided by the current system, are not adequately meeting these needs.

As commissioners we are aware that fewer people in Milton Keynes are able to access dental services compared to other parts of the region. This has become evident through an Oral Health Needs Assessment that is currently being refreshed and results from the GP survey which shows percentages of the population who are able to get a dental appointment. This shortage has become more acute since the closure of a moderately sized practice a couple of years ago. NHS England has made arrangements to commission a new service which will provide both routine and urgent dental care in Milton Keynes. We welcome the involvement of Healthwatch and members of the public to help shape this service to local ideals. We anticipate the new service will start in the spring of next year.

In addition it is recognised that there are long waiting lists for orthodontic treatment, so we have commissioned some additional courses of orthodontic treatment this year from our current providers to improve access to this service.

The contracts for orthodontic services will be tendered next year, so we will have the opportunity to commission the right amount of orthodontic care to meet the current and future orthodontic needs of children in Milton Keynes, taking into account the anticipated population growth.

We regularly communicate with our practices through a Dental Bulletin and have regular meetings with the Local Dental Committee (LDC). We will make the dental community aware of Healthwatch Milton Keynes' recommendations in the next issue of the bulletin.