



Health and Scrutiny Panel-Westminster

NHS dental services

1. Availability of NHS dental services

There are 50 NHS dental practices in Westminster and one orthodontic clinic. Patients can access NHS dental services across London and this is not dependent on postcode.

2. The impacts of COVID-19 on NHS Dental Services

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on the NHS including NHS dental services.
- 23 March 2020: The Chief Dental Officer for England announced all routine dentistry should be ceased to reduce the risk of viral transmission to protect both patients and the dental workforce. This has led to reduced capacity and a significant backlog of delayed treatment.
- On 1st April 2020, telephone triage alongside a network of urgent dental care hubs were set up in London so patients with urgent dental needs could have face-to-face care where clinically necessary
- On 1st June 2020, NHS dentistry was resumed and the Chief Dental Officer for England recommended that patients with urgent need needed to be prioritised over routine and non-urgent dental care.
- The inherent nature of dentistry which typically produces aerosol generating procedures increases the risk of viral transmission. Therefore, special measures had to be followed including infection prevention and control and social distancing. This meant that rooms had to be well ventilated and should be left empty for a period of at least 30 minutes between patients to reduce the risk of viral transmission. This has subsequently resulted in reduced capacity and reduced number of dental appointments.

Infection control and prevention guidance in healthcare settings:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control/covid-19-guidance-for-maintaining-services-within-health-and-care-settings-infection-prevention-and-control-recommendations>

3. Current context and NHS dental services

- Practices are working extremely hard to deal with urgent and outstanding courses of treatment and whilst some are in position to offer routine appointments within a reasonable timeframe, this is not uniform across London.

- All NHS dental practices are now open and able to safely provide a full range of treatments but are having to follow standard operating procedures as advised by the Chief Dental. Information about access to local dental services are available on NHS.UK website.
- Patients can to contact practices to see when they are able to offer an appointment. If the practice has capacity and patients may be offered a routine appointment, though this will vary from practice to practice based on their capacity and existing patient need.
- A number of practices have a back log and therefore have a waiting list before they can see new patients.
- If the patient needs to see a dentist for Urgent Dental Care (in pain or facial swelling), London has a well-established urgent dental care service. The patient would need to phone NHS 111 where patients will be assessed by an experienced dental nurse with the Dental Triage Service. These services are in operation 24/7 for patients who do not routinely attend a dental practice and have an urgent dental. If the triage service assesses that the issue is urgent, an appointment at an urgent dental care centre will be arranged.

4. What actions have we taken during the pandemic?

- As London had a well-established urgent dental care service pre-pandemic, we were able to mobilise urgent dental care hubs across London with immediate effect. The service was launched on 1st April ensuring all Londoners including residents of Westminster had access to urgent dental care. The service successfully dealt with 1600 call per day during the height of the pandemic ensuring any patient in London was able to access dental services to meet their urgent dental needs.
- Project tooth fairy: De-prioritisation of general anaesthetic services due to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to long waiting lists for dental treatment for children. This has been remedied by establishing the Tooth Fairy Project with a dedicated surgical site at Barts NHS Trust to deal with the backlog of cases and provide dental care for children.
- Looked after Children: The pandemic has limited the number of oral health assessments, which need to be conducted annually. To address this gap, we have established a pilot Healthy Smiles for Improving Oral Health of looked after children by liaising with looked after children's teams pan-London. We have delivered 2 webinars one for dental teams and the second webinar was aimed at looked after children's team to support them in signposting children to dedicated dental services. The pilot was launched on 15th Nov
- Homeless Oral Health: under the 'Everyone in scheme, 5000 toothbrush and tooth paste packs were distributed to hostels and hotels. A dedicated urgent dental care pathway was set up to see and treat individuals experiencing homelessness who have urgent dental care needs