

Accessing NHS Dentistry in Bolton

'NHS England is required to commission services to meet the needs of their local population, for both urgent and routine dental care.' (NHS dental services, NHS choices)

Report for the Health and Wellbeing Board

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Contents

Introduction.....	4
How Healthwatch Bolton manages dental enquiries	4
Methodology	5
Overview of Dental Enquiries	6
Access to NHS dentistry	7
Accurate information.....	8
Service availability outcomes from contacting dental practices listed on NHS Choices	10
Service availability outcomes from Contacting Dental practices obtained from internet search	10
Deregistration	11
Complaints	12
Healthwatch Bolton Analysis/Conclusion	13
Recommendations.....	13
References.....	14

Table of Figures

Figure 1 Number of Dental Enquiries	6
Figure 2 Number of Dental Enquiries by Postcode	7
Figure 3 Nature of Dental Enquiries	7
Figure 4 Case Study 1	8
Figure 5 Case Study 2	9
Figure 6 Case Study 3	9
Figure 7 Case Study 4	11
Figure 8 Case Study 5	11
Figure 9 Case Study 6	12
Figure 10 Public Attitudes Towards NHS Dentistry in Bolton (1st June 2013 - 17th Jan 2014).....	12

Introduction

Healthwatch, established in April 2013 under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 as a not for profit organisation, is a national independent champion for consumers and users of health and social care in England. Healthwatch is made up of Healthwatch England and 152 local Healthwatch organisations of which Healthwatch Bolton is one. Healthwatch gathers evidence to identify national consumer trends and issues in health and social care. It uses this evidence to influence national and local policy. Healthwatch has powers to ensure that the consumers' voice is heard by those who make decisions on health and social care services. We tell government bodies and local authorities in England about our findings, and Healthwatch England reports to Parliament every year.

Here in Bolton it is important to state that Healthwatch Bolton, whilst a new organisation, is not starting from scratch and that it builds on the excellent work already undertaken by the well-established Local Involvement Network – Bolton LINK. Healthwatch Bolton will be taking forward initiatives already started by Bolton LINK and building on them whilst balancing them with emerging priorities. Healthwatch Bolton differs from LINK in that it will be an independent legal entity and for the first time it also has an Information and Signposting service function and a responsibility for ensuring a stronger voice for children and young people as well as adults.

How Healthwatch Bolton manages dental enquiries

The Healthwatch Bolton Information and Signposting Service responds to queries on a wide range of health and social care issues – and is **not** a dedicated dental services hotline. However, Healthwatch Bolton will always try to find people an NHS dentist or respond to other dental enquires straightaway and where appropriate and necessary, challenges comments that seek to scapegoat and blame sections of society for the lack of NHS dentists. We know from experience that people from all walks of life are struggling to access NHS dentistry in Bolton.

It is beyond our role to operate a waiting list for people needing to register with an NHS dentist. Healthwatch Bolton has only **one** Information and Signposting Officer, operating such a list would impact on other aspects of the service, for instance, its development, influencing change and accommodating non-dental enquiries.

Since 1st June 2013 Healthwatch Bolton's Information and Signposting Service has received 311 enquiries. The vast majority of these enquiries relate to accessing local NHS dentistry in one form or another, either, registering as a new NHS patient, accessing emergency or specialist dental treatment or raising concerns about a dental practice. In a relatively short space of time, Healthwatch Bolton, as an independent voice for local people, has recorded data which makes it evidently clear that NHS dentistry remains 'a major concern'. This report reinforces the need for more NHS dentists and thus provides a strong case that the scarcity of NHS dentistry in Bolton is an issue that can no longer be ignored.

Methodology

- Analysis of Healthwatch Bolton Information and Signposting records, identifying the major themes for this report such as the total number of dental enquiries, number of dental enquiries by postcode, people's experience of the range of difficulties they face when trying to access NHS dentistry, emerging issues/trends/patterns and Healthwatch Bolton analysis¹.
- Regularly contacting individual dental practices in order to ascertain which practice is accepting new NHS patients.
- Examination of local, regional and national press coverage about NHS dentistry.

¹ Please note: people's personal details have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

Overview of Dental Enquiries

'Everyone should be able to access good-quality NHS services. There is no need to register with a dentist. Simply find a practice that's convenient for you, whether it's near your home, or work, and phone them to see if any appointments are available... If the dental practice you first contact is full or doesn't provide NHS care, this doesn't mean that no NHS dental care is available... There may be a high demand for NHS dentists in some areas and you may have to join a waiting list...' (NHS dental services, NHS choices, page last reviewed: 29/02/2012)

From 1st June 2013 to 17th January 2014, 311 people contacted Healthwatch Bolton's Information and Signposting Service. 240 (77%) of these enquiries are from people needing to access NHS dentistry.

The number of dental enquiries has risen dramatically from 1st June. Peaking in October 2013 with 57 enquiries. The average over the period has been 30 calls per month. The overwhelming number of enquiries 222 (92.5%) were about access. BL1 has been identified as the key area from which we get most of our enquiries and also the area where habitually there are no NHS dentists accepting new patients. **(Please refer to appendix A for NHS choices search results)**

The majority of callers are signposted to us from Lever Chambers Centre for Health which formerly provided the Community Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Many callers have visited NHS choices and/or made countless calls to dental practices – this has been to no avail. By the time enquirers get to us not only are they upset and angry by the lack of NHS dentist their frustration is also compounded by inaccurate and outdated information on NHS choices and local health information leaflets.

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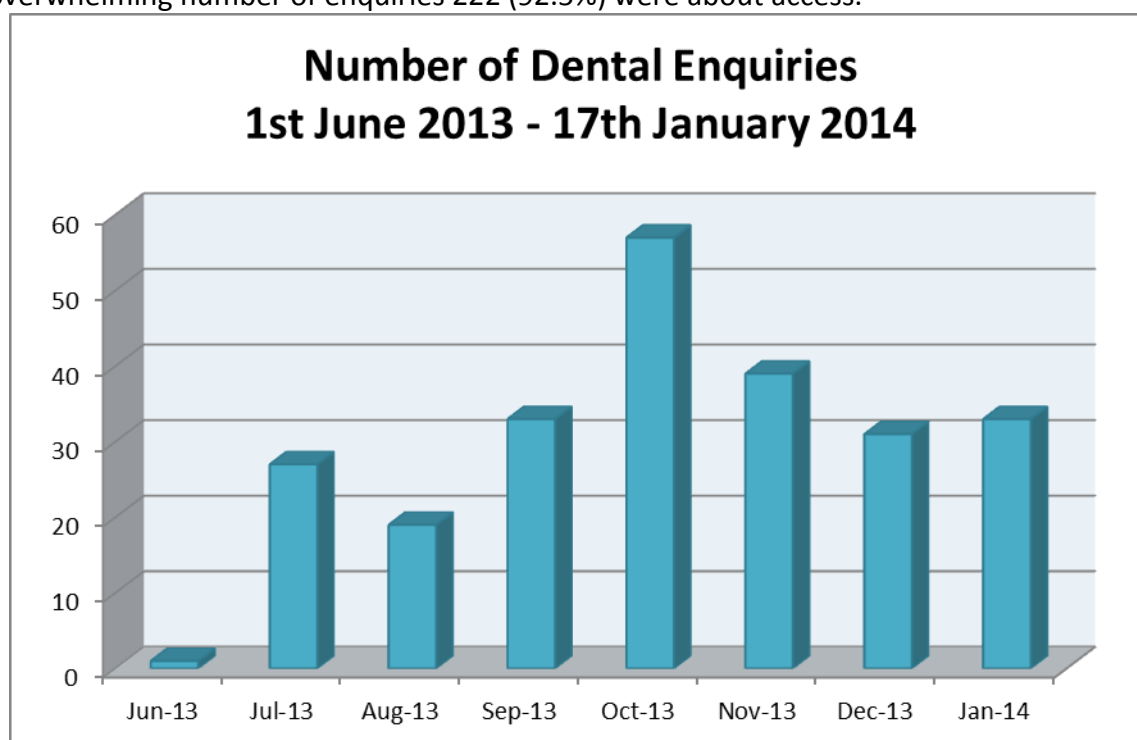


Figure 1 Number of Dental Enquiries

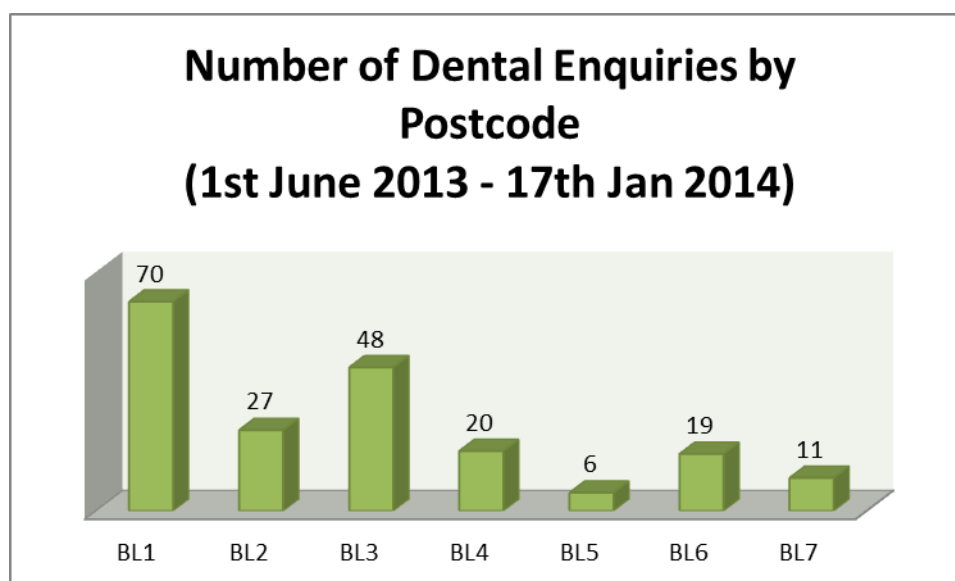


Figure 2 Number of Dental Enquiries by Postcode

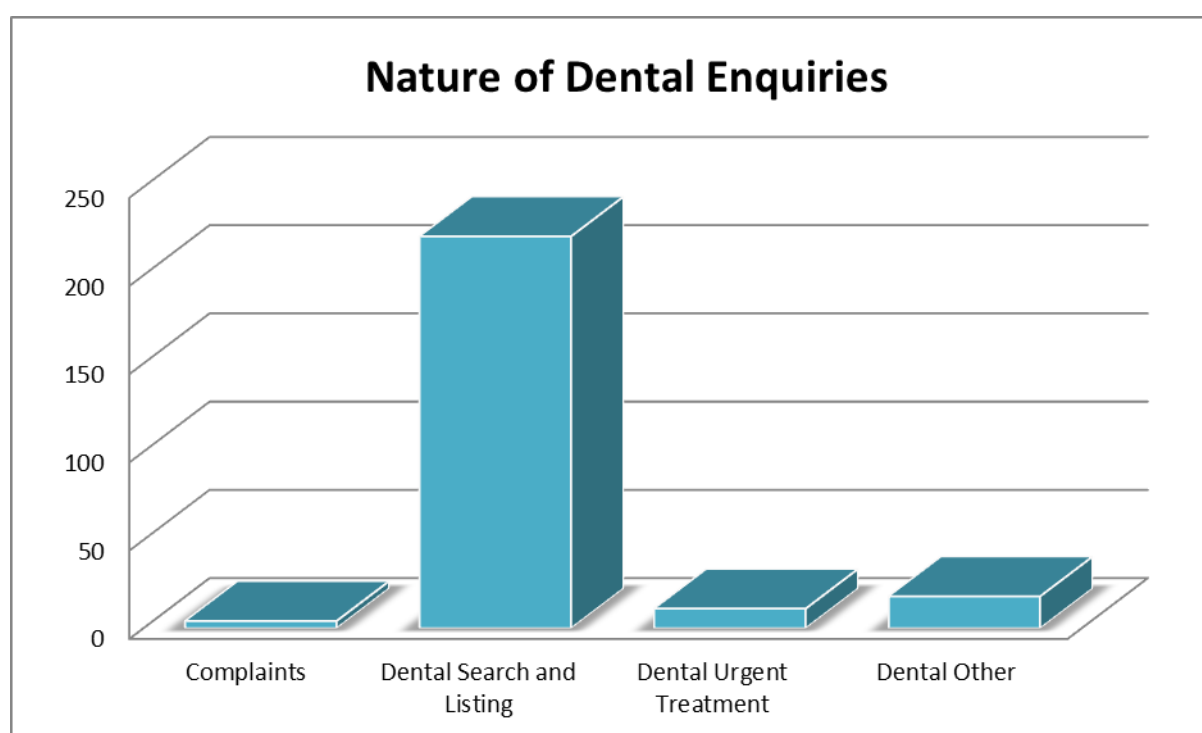


Figure 3 Nature of Dental Enquiries

Access to NHS dentistry

In 2010, Kenneth Rigg produced a Dentistry Report on behalf of Bolton LINK. The fundamental finding of this report was the need to increase in the number of NHS dentists in the borough.

On 21st January 2011, the *Bolton News* published an article claiming that 'People without a dentist in Bolton face a waiting list of up to three months because of a shortage of places.' Lamentably, this situation seems to have deteriorated, for examples, in 2013, Darby Street Dental Practice (BL3) told Healthwatch Bolton they had a waiting as long as two to three years.

In 2013, Healthwatch Bolton started to contact local dentists directly to ascertain whether they are accepting new NHS patients (both children and adults) so we can be sure that the information we provide is accurate. Some dental practices we contacted are listed on NHS choices; others were obtained from an internet search. Below is a snapshot of our findings. **(Please refer to appendix A for NHS choices search results)**

There have been several instances when people have had to travel outside of the borough for dental treatment. For instance, Healthwatch Bolton has signposted people living in the BL1 area to dental practices in Little Hulton. Several people have expressed that they will struggle to access treatment too far from home, particularly if they are relying on public transport. This is affecting people who are living on low-incomes, people with dependents, those in receipt of benefits or those living with a disability. See case examples below.

Miss A lives in Bolton with her three children; the eldest child is living with a long-term health condition. She cannot afford to travel to dentists in Farnworth and Kearsley.

Mr Y is a single dad of three children aged 3, 4, and 5 years old. Mr Y does not drive; his only transport is a bike with a carriage.

Figure 4 Case Study 1

There are cases when members of the same family have to register at different dental practices due to some practices only accepting children – even then there can be a waiting list for children.

Members of the public often ask why there are no NHS dentists in Bolton and what, if anything, are decision makers doing about it. A familiar sentiment has been: I have paid into the system and now my family and I cannot access treatment when we need it most. On a number of occasions sentiments such as these have been followed by comments that scapegoat and blame others, i.e. ‘immigrants’, ‘yobs’ and the ‘unemployed’ for the shortages of NHS dentists. These types of comments highlight important issues about perceptions of fairness, rights and equality in health and social care.

These sentiments can, and do, sometimes spill over into behaviour which can compromise the safety of staff, Healthwatch Bolton have had direct experience of this when a member of the public came to the office aggressively demanding urgent treatment and to register with an NHS dentist in Bolton, and we are aware that staff in other services have faced similar incidents.

In 2007, Health Minister Ben Bradley stated that ‘If people need urgent treatment they should go either to their GP or the primary care trust and demand what is their right.’ This comment may be well intentioned but in the context of such a serious paucity of services it is difficult to see how such statements are constructive.

Accurate information

The NHS choices website is certified by The Information Standard quality mark. According to the Information Standard website:

‘When you see The Information Standard quality mark on any materials, you can be assured that organisation has undergone a rigorous assessment and that the information they produce is clear, accurate, impartial, evidence-based and up-to-date. This will help you make informed decisions, for yourself and for your family, when it comes to considering health and care options.’

In our experience, the information on NHS choices does not meet these standards; in particular the information is rarely up-to-date. In response to this dilemma the Healthwatch Bolton Information and Signposting team has started to contact dental practices directly to verify the published information about service availability is correct. (See the tables overleaf for examples of inaccuracies on the NHS choices website).

Not all dental practices are listed on NHS choices. Healthwatch Bolton therefore has also started to do independent research (internet search plus telephone follow up) to check service availability across the Borough.

We are also aware that some public information resources available in Bolton are inaccurate. (Please see the example below). This is confusing the issue not just for patients and service providers.

On Tuesday 14th January 2014, Mr M contacted Healthwatch Bolton in search of an NHS dentist after his GP Practice (Waters Meeting Health Centre) gave him the leaflet titled ‘Bolton Primary Care Dental Services – Information for Patients’ (see appendix B). Mr M stated that he contacted **five** places before getting through to Healthwatch Bolton. Even then we were only able to cautiously signpost to one or two dental practices; explaining that as soon as a dental practice becomes available it very quickly becomes unavailable due to the scarcity of NHS dentists accepting new patients.

Figure 5 Case Study 2

Finally, in a desperate search for accurate information we phoned NHS England. The outcome of this exercise is related in the box below.

On Tuesday 7th January 2014, Healthwatch Bolton contacted NHS England to enquire about registering with an NHS dentist.

- NHS England signposted to NHS choices, we were given the details for the Smile Clinic, (Horwich), Church Street Dental Practice (Westhoughton) and the Local Area Team.
- Although both the Smile Clinic and Church Street showed on NHS choices that they were accepting new patients we knew from recent contacts that neither was accepting new NHS patients at present or on a waiting list.
- We then rang the Local Area Team who signposted us to NHS signposting services in Blackburn and Bury. Highlighting the fact that there is no similar NHS-based service for Bolton.

Figure 6 Case Study 3

Service availability outcomes from contacting dental practices listed on NHS Choices

Date of contact	Dental Practice listed as accepting new patients on NHS choices	Outcome
17/01/2014	Haslam Park Dental Practice – BL3	People can register but the practice has a six months waiting list. Patients maybe sooner.
08/01/2014	Harwood Dental Practice – BL2	Only accepting adult private patients and children ages 0 – 18. N.B: Harwood Dental Practice is also listed as Mr Earp Dental Practice. Mr Earp is no longer at this practice.
06/01/2014	Church Street Dental Practice – BL5	Full – not accepting new NHS patients
06/01/2014	Westhoughton (No.1) Ltd – BL5	10 months waiting list
01/2014	Highfield Dental Practice - BL4	Not currently accepting new patients
04/12/2013	Little Lever Dental Practice – BL3	Eight to 12 months waiting list
04/12/2013	Bolton Road Dental Clinic (formerly Daylesford and Associates – BL4	Six months
03/12/2013	Smile Dental, Little Hulton – M38 9WH	Two – three weeks waiting list
03/12/2013	Mayfield Dental Practice - M46	One – two months
03/12/2013	The Dental Practice – M26	Refused to give any information, asked to call back after 5pm
08/2013	Darby Street Dental Practice, BL3	Two to three years waiting list
2013	Moss Dental – BL2	Only accepting children ages 0 – 18 years

Service availability outcomes from Contacting Dental practices obtained from internet search

Date of contact	Dental Practice (online search)	Outcome
07/01/2014	A.G Bennison – BL1	Not currently accepting new NHS patients
07/01/2014	Cahill Dental Care Centre – BL1	No NHS contract
07/01/2014	M Glynn – BL1	Not currently accepting new NHS patients
07/01/2014	R A Heywood – BL1	Not currently accepting new NHS patients
07/01/2014	Dental Surgery - BL3	Will be taking on new NHS patients in a couple of months
07/01/2014	Freel H.J and McGeachy M – BL4	Healthwatch received a call from a member of the public stating this practice has now closed.
07/01/2014	C.M Schofield – BL2	Private patients only – independent practice
07/01/2014	W.B Whittle – BL2	No NHS contract

07/01/2014	Duncalf Dental Practice – BL7	Not currently accepting new NHS patients
07/01/2014	Fresh Dental – BL3	Accepting new NHS patients. People can register immediately but there is a 6 months waiting list
17/01/2014	Sharples Dental Practice – BL1	Not accepting new NHS patients and no waiting list
17/01/2014	Ravat and Ray Dental Care – BL3	Only accepting private patients and children – if their parents are registered
17/01/2014	True Dentistry – BL1	No NHS contract
17/01/2014	Synergy Dental Surgery – BL1	12 months waiting list
17/01/2014	Integrated Dental Holdings – BL2	Accepting new NHS, however, people can only contact this practice on a Monday between 10am – 12noon. No guarantee to be seen the same week. Some people may have to contact the practice several times
17/02/2014	The Smile Clinic, Bolton – BL1	Not accepting new NHS patients until approximately February 2014
17/01/2014	The Smile Clinic, Horwich – BL5	Currently accepting new NHS patients
17/01/2014	530 Dental Care – BL1	Accepting adult private patients only
July/August 2013	Kearsley Dental Care	Only accepting patients if relatives are already registered at the practice

Deregistration

We have collected some evidence that missing an NHS dentist appointment can and does result in a patient being struck off the register. The General Dental Council stated that the number of missed dental appointments resulting in somebody being deregistered is not set in stone, it is up to each individual practice, however, the practice MUST clearly display their policy on this matter.

Patient experiences suggest that individual circumstances are not being taken into account in deregistration decisions. Whilst there is an appreciation that missed health appointments can prolong treatment, delays treatment for other patients, and costs the NHS money. There are times in our lives when circumstances beyond our control result in missed health appointments. See the case examples below.

While Ms S was experiencing domestic violence she missed a dental appointment. She visited her dental practice with relevant police protection documents as evidence of her reasons for missing the appointment. The dental practice told Ms S ‘sorry, that’s not a valid reason.’

Figure 7 Case Study 4

Mrs X missed a dental appointment while her husband was in hospital receiving cancer treatment. She was subsequently deregistered.

Figure 8 Case Study 5

Complaints

Although the number of people who have made or considered making a formal complaint is relatively low, we do have some examples of dissatisfied consumers. See the box below.

- Ms X was considering making a complaint about her dentist after she claimed to have seen him put rubbish in an outside bin and wipe his hands on his uniform.
- Mrs S, raised her complaint to the General Dental Council about concerns she had been overcharged for her dentures which she has never been able wear. Further similar claims concerning the same dental practice have emerged.
- Miss E was signposted to the Independent Complaints Advocacy (ICA) service as she was considering making a complaint about the lack of communication from receptionists and a delayed hospital referral.

Figure 9 Case Study 6

Bolton has two emergency dental services: Lever Chambers Centre for Health emergency dentist and the Rotational Occasional Treatment Service (ROTS). Healthwatch Bolton has not received any formal complaints about the emergency service at Lever Chambers Centre for Health. However, people have expressed their dissatisfaction with ROTS specifically concerning the time it takes to get through to the service and the allocation of appointments. **(See appendix C)**

The relatively low number of formal dental complaints should not make us complacent as the table below has captured the overwhelmingly negative attitudes that people living in Bolton have about NHS dentistry.

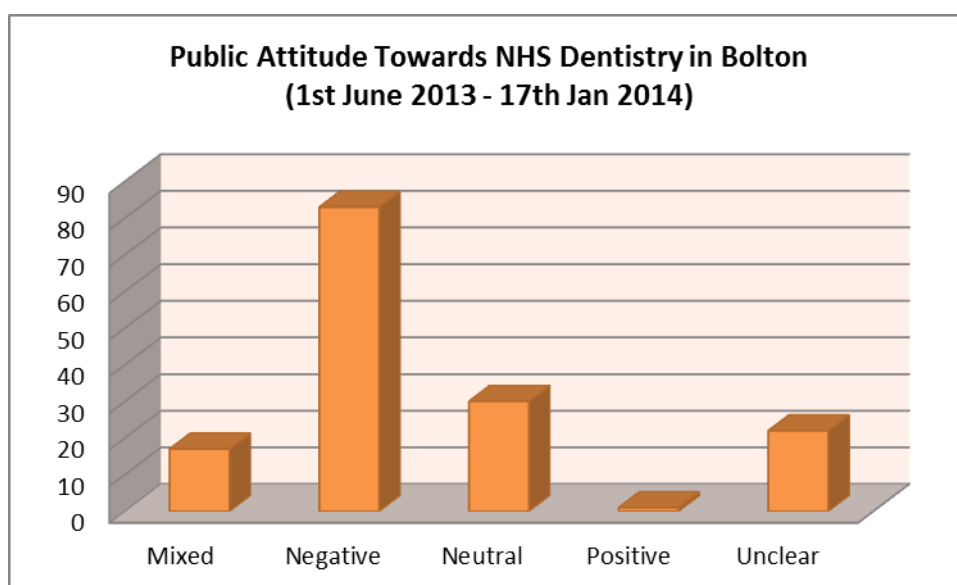


Figure 10 Public Attitudes Towards NHS Dentistry in Bolton (1st June 2013 - 17th Jan 2014)

Healthwatch Bolton Analysis/Conclusion

Healthwatch Bolton has identified that NHS dentistry is still a big issue for people living in Bolton. It is increasingly becoming more difficult to signpost people to dental practices that are accepting new NHS patients. Put simply, Bolton needs more NHS dentists. This lack of NHS dental services has left many people believing that they have no choice whatsoever when it comes to accessing dental treatment and they must either go private or suffer from poor oral health. The obvious danger is that the less access people have to affordable dentistry services the higher the likelihood of more costly corrective treatment in the future.

Recommendations

Improving access

- More NHS dentists in Bolton.
- A clear contract from commissioners allowing Healthwatch Bolton to work with dentists to submit daily information on whether they are accepting new NHS patients. Healthwatch Bolton does not have the capacity to contact individual dental practices every week.

Accurate, updated information

- Dental practices to ensure their information on NHS choices is accurate and up-to-date.
- NHS England to ensure dental practices adhere to their obligation under the Information Standard.
- NHS England to ensure information for Bolton's emergency dental services and specialist community dental service is visible, accurate and up-to-date.
- Lever Chambers Centre for Health to give people the details of the emergency dentist. Enquiries regarding the emergency dentist are still being forwarded to Healthwatch Bolton only for us to signpost people back to Lever Chambers Centre for Health – *where this emergency dental service is located*.
- The ROTS answering phone message should be activated immediately to inform people when all appointments have been allocated.

Deregistration

- Every dental practice must make it clear what their policy is on lateness/missed/cancelling appointments to ensure their patients are informed of their rights and responsibilities (see *The National Health Service (General Dental Contracts) Regulations 2005*, Schedule 4, Patient Information Leaflet (section 18)).
- Where evidence can be provided, missed NHS dental appointments should be considered on their own merit.

Myth busting

- Respond to the issue of scapegoating and blaming of sections of society for the lack of NHS dentistry in Bolton - NHS England could produce a document which informs people why there is a shortage of NHS dentists.

References

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