

Reply to Joan Atkins (Town Councillor Central Ward) who, as an individual, lodge a complaint about the provision of NHS Dental Service in Teignmouth and the surrounding area – or rather the lack of it. The following reply was received from the Regional Director of Commissioning at NHS England South West. It was addressed to Ms Atkins Private & Confidential, Addressee Only and she has cleared with the appropriate office at NHS England SW that it is OK to share, as follows:

I am writing in reference to your correspondence with NHS England regarding your dissatisfaction with NHS dental service in Devon. I am sorry that your family's needs and expectations have not been met.

Your complaint was shared with the South West Dental Commissioning Team who have asked me to share the following:

“Thank you for your recent communication concerning access to NHS dental services in Devon. I am sorry to hear about the experiences you have had in trying to access NHS dental care.

Access to NHS dental service in Devon has historically been challenging, with demand exceeding the capacity available mainly due to insufficient workforce and the capacity of practices to take on new patients. NHS places continue to be made available however are unable to match the growing demand, largely due to challenges practices are experiencing in recruitment. Work is underway at a national level to identify solutions to the recruitment and retention pressures in NHS dental services, and to understand and address the constraints of the current national NHS dental contract mechanisms. The local NHS England dental commissioning team is working with local partners and accessing any additional support available nationally, to address the shortfall in NHS dental services. We have a range of actions that are underway, including:

- Working with dental providers to ensure existing contracts are delivering to their maximum potential. We review the under and over performance of our dental contracts on a regular basis, and support practices to deliver on their contracted activity. We procure new contracts in an area where there is insufficient detail access but need to be able to ensure the workforce can be secured by a new contractor.
- Commissioning additional NHS work from dental practices that have capacity.
- We continue to work closely with local dental networks (led by dentists across the region) dental practices, public health experts, and the dental school to develop referral pathways and identify initiatives to increase dental capacity in the community. The limiting factor currently is workforce and we are working with the national dental workforce team to look at more innovative ways to attract dental staff to the area.
- We work with Local Authority Public Health teams who lead on Oral Health Promotion and Improvement including health promotion for both children and adults.

Currently, practices are continuing to work through the impact of the pandemic on capacity and access and are trying their best to accommodate patients with the range of care available and funded by the NHS. Across the country, the impact of the pandemic is also still being felt in terms of the number of NHS dental providers reducing and the number of dental professionals leaving the profession. We continue to undertake regular review of demand versus capacity including urgent dental care to ensure provision is available for those that need it more.

Practices in Devon are working with the Dental Helpline to ensure that as NHS places become available, they are made available to those patients who have contacted the helpline and are seeking NHS dental care. The team can help individual patients secure the best care for them according to their location and ability to travel, and continuously review where and when places are becoming available and ensure patients are allocated to a practice as quickly as possible when places become available. Please find the contact details for the helpline should you require them: Dental Helpline telephone 03330 063 300 or email accessdentalhelpline@nhs.net.

The Dental Helpline centrally assist patients in finding an NHS dentist. When there are no spaces available for immediate access to a routine appointment with a dentist, the helpline team works with practices to ensure people seeking NHS dental care are offered a dentist as soon as places are available in their preferred area.

When contacting the dental helpline, individuals are asked to indicate preferred areas in which to be allocated and will be allocated to a practice in one of these areas as places become available. Sometimes places do become available which may be outside of the patient's immediate preferred area and if the patient is prepared to travel this may mean that they receive treatment sooner. If this is an option you wish to consider than we advise you to contact the helpline and discuss the options with them.

It may be helpful to explain that dental practices are independent businesses, often providing a combination of NHS and private dentistry. Patients are not registered with a dentist in the same way they are with a General Practitioner (Doctor), and individuals can access services at a dental practice located in any area if the practice is accepting new patients. Practices providing NHS treatment are listed on www.nhs.uk. NHS England does not held information on practices who are currently accepting new patients. It is the practice's responsibility to maintain accurate information on www.nhs.uk, we regularly communicate to practices the importance of reviewing and updating this information

Unfortunately, it is not possible to say exactly at the current time when individual practices will be able to take on new patients. We would recommend that you contact the Dental Helpline and they will be able to advise you. Unfortunately, we are unable to directly assist you with locating a dentist as we need to ensure equity of process for all patients.

If any individual has a dental emergency, there are arrangements in place to ensure that anyone who doe not have a dentist and has an urgent dental need can access an urgent dental appointment. Patients in Devon should contact NHS 111 or Access Dental 03330 063 330 in the event of an urgent dental need."

I trust that my letter and the conclusions to your complaint have provided the reassurance that your complaint has been taken seriously.

.....the letter then gives further contact information for the complaints team, etc,

In closing, whist I appreciate that my response has not assisted with allocating your family a dentist, I hope that the information provided has given you some reassurance that the NHS England dental commissioning team are very aware of the issues and are working to address these going forward

Yours sincerely
Regional Director of Commissioning
NHS England South West
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This response is shared for information of Town Councillors and Teignmouth residents as going some way to explaining the dire situation we find ourselves in.

Joan Atkins
31.1.23