

NHS DENTISTRY REPORT

Results of a call for evidence on people's experience with NHS dentistry



Willie Rennie MSP | February 2024

Introduction

I am grateful to the hundreds of people who responded to my call for information about NHS dentistry with their experiences. Whilst it is clear that many people don't have problems, are registered with an NHS dentist and able to receive treatment.

However, we know that there are problems. Currently in Fife no dental practices are accepting new NHS patients. The responses I received reflect the frustration of people who can't get registered, some of whom have gone for years without an appointment or have given up trying to register.

It is the role of MSPs and the Scottish Government to address problems. That is why this report is focussed on the problems which people raised with me. These included some people being forced to take extreme steps to get dental treatment: DIY dentistry, travelling hundreds of miles, paying a small fortune, hunting for an NHS dentist for weeks on end without success.

These problems are widespread and must be addressed. I hope that compiling people's experiences in this report, and the subsequent debate in the Scottish Parliament, will go some way to forcing the government to act.

- Willie Rennie

Many people can't register

There are many people registered with an NHS dentist and happy with their treatment, although many people emphasised that they felt 'lucky' that this was the case.

- "In these current times I know we are extremely lucky to have a family dentist currently but I cannot help worry that our situation changes if the dentist decides to write off NHS patients or closes their practice..." – Megan Hughes
- "We are lucky now to have an NHS dentist but many people are still in waiting lists and don't have access. I am also aware that the old 6 month check-up is now a year check-up." – Jackie Kerr

Many people who responded are not able to register with an NHS dentist and have faced long waits.

- "We moved to Springfield in September 2023. We tried to register with an NHS dentist in Pro dental in Cupar but they say are full and they have more than 500 people on the waiting list. We also went to Cupar Dental Access Centre next to Adamson hospital and were told that they were also full, they only take children's registration and not taking any new registrations for any adults and we were given a number to call for those who take registrations in Fife but then we were informed that everywhere is full, there were registration open somewhere about 3 hours away from Cupar. So, we decided not to register there. Until now we are not registered." – Mr and Mrs Page
- "I've been staying in Newburgh for 2 years now and cannot get any dentist to take me on. Is this an issue that can be resolved? I cannot afford to go private and pay for all my dental bills in the future." – Aimee Stevenson
- "I waited a year on arriving back in Fife to try and get admitted as an NHS patient. Tried 3 practices, none had any spaces. Weren't even keeping a waiting list." – Sandy Wilkie
- "I moved back to the area a few years ago and have never been able to see a dentist. I have attempted to register with a dentist quite a few times. Ringing round all dentists in Fife and Tayside and as yet I've had no luck. It is very disappointing as I have always worked and contributed through taxes since leaving school and feel it is very unfair that I am not able to access this NHS service. I've actually had receptionist laugh down the phone, saying I am one of many phone calls asking to register. Very disheartening." – Euan Grant

Some people are travelling long distances to be seen

A number of the people who responded described how they make long journeys to see dentists where they are registered.

- “There are no dental practises in St Andrews currently that I can find that are taking on NHS patients and been like that for a while! I am still using my parents address to access a dentist on west coast but once their estate is finalised will be without..dreading this!” – Elaine MacAlpine Stewart
- “I am a pensioner, living in Newburgh, and I have kept on my NHS dentist in Gorgie Road, Edinburgh, (from when we lived in Kirknewton) as I am unable to find an NHS dentist, who is taking on new patients, near me here in Fife. It’s quite nice to have a reason to go to Edinburgh for a check-up and a day out twice a year! But not so good when I need treatment that takes a few visits, or when I have a dental emergency.” – Clare Doig
- “I’m still having to travel out to Dalkeith, Midlothian. Have done for the past 11yrs! 3hrs return travel.” – Lynda Matear

There were several people who travel outside of Scotland in order to be seen.

- “I am not with an NHS dentist as I cannot get on their list. My wife’s dentist was in Tayport this as you know closed, she received a letter telling her to call their sister surgery’s in Cupar and Dundee which she did and was put on their waiting lists as they were full. This was in January 2023 the silence is deafening. On a lighter note we go to Goa in winter and use Indian dentists, the irony of this is the dentist we use trained and qualified at Dundee dental hospital.” – Alfie and Maggie Cook
- “Where does an OAP (me in 5 weeks) get a dentist in Dunfermline? The one I was with for over 25 years changed hands and asked for £29 a month not including any treatment. Livid isn’t the word for it . So myself and my wife are off to Turkey for check-ups and anything needing done.” – Anon.

Some of those who are registered face long waits

Amongst people who were registered with an NHS dentist, a common complaint was long waiting times before they could be seen.

- “My son chipped his tooth at school before Christmas. We tried to get it seen to they couldn’t see him till February the 5th. When that date came around our appointment was cancelled 20minuets before we were meant to attend it. Me losing time of work getting him to go and him losing school time. They were meant to re arrange but as of yet they haven’t.” – Adam Ritchie

Others noted that their check-ups were now less frequent. Some respondents said that their dentists had stopped proactively offering check-ups.

- “Last time I went (3 months ago, ish) I asked if they were doing routine check-ups. I was told that they were if you asked for them, but they didn't have enough capacity to offer them to everyone. So I asked and have just had my first routine check-up in 4 years.” – Peter Davey
- “We attended the East Neuk Dental Practice in Anstruther pre-covid but after covid could not get an appointment until March 2023.
- We’ve had one appointment since then, in January this year, but were told then that if we wanted to stay as NHS patients then our next appointment would be in 12 months time. If we wanted 6-monthly reviews, we would have to pay (can’t remember how much) so we decided to stay with the NHS.” – Christine and David Noble
- “Clearly, the Covid outbreak wreaked havoc on the practice and its patients, and it does not appear to have returned to anything like its previous standard. Prior to that, I always saw the dentist every three months and the hygienist the same. It is now virtually impossible to get a hygienist appointment without paying privately for it (I haven't seen one for several years now). Appointments with the dentist are harder to get than a lottery win! I am reduced to one every year and even getting that in the diary is horribly difficult. I call, I visit and am told it is too early to book the appointment and to call later in the year.” – Marian Thomas

Many people said they had reluctantly paid for private dentistry

The difficulty in registering with an NHS dentist has left many people reluctantly paying for private treatment.

- “I had a NHS dentist in who I was happy with. They decided to go private and explained their reasons in the local press. The rationale was although the NHS had simplified the coding structure of cost recovery for their practice, they were losing money. I decided, with no other NHS dentist availability, to go private. My 6 monthly check-ups cost me £250 a year which I can afford and I have enough savings to deal with routine treatment. However there will be many people who will not be able to afford this solution and some people who refuse to take this option because they see free check-ups as a right.” – Ian Preece
- “I was forced to go private at the Anstruther dentists as I needed a lump on my gum investigated and a tooth removed. I’m very much against private treatment but on this occasion I had to for the sake of my oral health.” – Sandy Wilkie
- “I could not get any treatment during pandemic like thousands of others, post-pandemic due to the state of my oral health I paid two thousand six hundred pounds for private treatment to sort this out, I am not with an NHS dentist as I cannot get on their list.” – Alfie and Maggie Cook.

For some this is a difficult financial pressure.

- “I was an NHS dentist patient at our local Newburgh dentist but it went private last year, my young boys have been kept on as free patients but I have now had to book in for my first appointment under the private care which is £75 just for an oral health check before proceeding with any further treatment. As a stay at home mum this is a huge extra cost, I am also under 25 so could be getting free treatment still if I could find an NHS dentist but I have phoned round all the neighbouring towns and not found any places taking on NHS patients.” – Stella Shearer
- “In one month, I spent almost £400 on X-rays, two fillings and cleaning. This left me short for food, which meant I skipped meals so that my son could eat.” – Newburgh Resident.

Some people have gone years without seeing a dentist

The inability to register with an NHS dentist has clearly meant that many people have spent years without seeing a dentist.

- “I’ve not been to a dentist for a few years now, the last time I went I was able to use Broxden Dentists in Perth but they then said they were no longer able to keep me as a patient. I know from family and friends that NHS dentists are few and far between, with those having been for treatment recently being told that there will no longer be any NHS dentists and the easiest way is to take out a dental plan to cover costs. The cheapest of these is £29 per month - and that only covers a couple of basic check-ups, no cover for any work needing done.” – Anne Duff
- “I was registered with dentist in Tayport. It closed 3 years ago. I last had a check-up 3 years ago. I can go to sister practice in Cupar but can't get a check-up because it's too busy, one dentist only working 2 days a week. Cupar not really convenient if you don't drive, my husband would take me if I could get appointment. I've tried to get registered elsewhere, in Newport or Dundee with no luck. I'm just hoping things may improve soon.” – Christine Hindman
- “To date, I’ve not been able to gain access to a dentist in well over 2 years - I broke a tooth around a year ago and after pleading for an emergency appointment was told they couldn’t fulfil as once again: no dentist was working.” – William Paterson
- “I feel the current system isn’t working we are looking for another nhs dentist somewhere and hope it’s better as I cant afford private.” – Adam Ritchie
- “I am a Cupar resident who is registered with a Cupar dentist practice. I have not been seen by my NHS dentist since before the Covid Pandemic. I even called up to check if I was even still registered with them. They said I was but had quite a large backlog they were still trying to work through.” – Stuart Letham

Consequences of lack of access to dentistry

In some cases, the lack of treatment has resulted in some dramatic consequences, including people resorting to 'DIY dentistry'. In others, people have been left in pain for extended periods.

- “There is no access to an NHS dentist in Tayport. I have been on a waiting list for 4 years now. I have had to resort to 'DIY dentistry' with dental tools purchased on Amazon to remove dental calculus (I am actually not joking).” – Stephen Kelley
- “Our daughter in Stanley who is an NHS patient in Perth, has spent the last 21 months in discomfort and pain. What began as one abscess, led to many courses of antibiotics, spreading infection, terrible pain, and the loss of several teeth with several more now needing to be removed. What a sad state of affairs!” – Elaine Leng
- “With increasing costs of everything else, we are struggling as it is. Both my partner and myself both work full time in reasonably well-paid employment, and are struggling greatly to meet the demands of our bills. My partner suffered for weeks in pain before being able to see a dentist and in the end chose to have his tooth pulled out because it was cheaper.” – Lynne Gilmour

Note on methodology

Willie Rennie put out a call for people's experiences accessing NHS dentistry on his social media pages and in his email newsletter. The responses included above are drawn from comments which he received by email and whose respondents agreed for them to be included. Further comments which were received as comments on Willie Rennie's social media pages were considered but not included.