



# People Share Their Views on Dentistry Services in Central Bedfordshire

March 2021

# Content overview...



Introduction

P3

About this  
report

P5

Impact of the  
Covid-19  
Pandemic

P6

Methodology

P8

Analysis of  
survey results

P9

You said, We did

P24

Summary

P26

Conclusion

P28

Recommendations

P29

Appendix A -  
Survey questions

P30

Appendix B -  
Additional survey  
comments

P33

About  
Healthwatch  
Central  
Bedfordshire

P39



# Introduction

Accessing dental treatment has been a long-standing national issue due to postcode lotteries, failed contracts and underfunding, according to the British Dental Association (BDA). The BDA reports an unprecedented rise in calls and complaints over summer 2020 about both these long-standing and COVID-related issues in dentistry.

More recently, Healthwatch England (HWE) also produced a report called 'Dentistry: Ongoing issues and the impact of COVID-19' following a 452% rise in calls and complaints to local Healthwatch. The full report can be found on our website: <https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HW-Eng-report.-A-review-of-our-evidence-Q2-2020-21.pdf>

The key recommendations highlighted in Healthwatch England's report are:-

- **Clearer information** - information should be more accurate about dentists taking on NHS patients:
  - o HWE recommends that the Government should make it a legal requirement of the dental contract for dentists to regularly update information on their websites and NHSUK. They also recommend that National Health Service England (NHSE) must ensure that their "Find a dentist" website is kept up to date and both dentists and patients are clear about the NHS dental treatment charges.
  - o NHSE needs to clarify the confusion to dental practices about what it means to be 'registered' with a dental practice and dentists need to clarify this with the public and their patients.
- **The new dental contract** - this has been in development since 2009; it needs to be finalised and rolled out to ensure dentists are supported to help those most in need.
- **Access to be improved** - address increasing access issues across England for routine and urgent care, exacerbated by the pandemic. The Government must provide more resources to reduce the backlog and resolve the problem.
- **Affordability** - it is recommended that the Government and the NHS should review the cost of NHS dental treatments as many people struggle to afford the NHS charge, especially during the pandemic when people have lost their jobs and have less money.





Nationally, during the pandemic, the NHS 111 service has been widely used by people who are not currently registered with a local dentist or who have not been able to contact their usual dentist because of Covid-19 restrictions. NHS 111, in many cases, were able to directly contact a dental surgery, on behalf of the patient, for emergency and/or out of hours care and also provide self- treatment advice.

Healthwatch England (HWE) supported the British Dental Association (BDA) to campaign for better access to dental care, and as Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCBS) regularly receive feedback from local residents relating to accessing dental care in Central Bedfordshire, we wanted to explore this further.

To enable us to hear more about the challenges faced, we developed a dental survey for local residents to complete which was published on our website between January and February 2021. The survey included questions about accessing NHS dental care within Central Bedfordshire both before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020/2021. This was a relatively short time period to give us a snapshot view.

HWCBS continue to receive telephone and email queries about dental access in Central Bedfordshire and endeavor to provide up to date guidance and information, as well as signposting people to other sources of information. Examples of how HWCBS has supported local residents are included later in this report under the section *'You said, we did'*.

**Have you  
experienced  
limited  
availability of  
NHS dental care?**





# About this report

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) regularly hear from local residents sharing their experiences of health and social care services which includes issues and concerns about accessing dental services in Central Bedfordshire. People also told us that it can be difficult to get the correct treatment on the NHS and that fees and charges can be hard to understand.

This report provides NHS leaders, the Local Dental Network (LDN) and key stakeholders with a summary of:

- Key issues raised by local residents of Central Bedfordshire about accessing dental services before and during the pandemic, and how this affected their experience of dental services.
- The feedback we received from the survey questions relating to the difficulties experienced accessing an NHS dentist in the previous 12 months, including how they rated the standard of care and whether they were offered private treatment as an alternative to NHS treatment.
- Examples of issues raised by residents of Central Bedfordshire and how HWCB has supported them can be found in this report under *'You Said, We Did'*

The final report will be shared with key stakeholders, NHS England and Healthwatch England, with our recommendations, to help influence improvements in accessing NHS dental services across Central Bedfordshire.





# Impact of the

# Covid-19 Pandemic

Over the past year Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the availability of dental care, in particular routine and emergency dental services, with many people feeling unsure about when they would next see a dentist or having to travel long distances to get the care and treatment they need. In addition, many issues were raised regarding the affordability of non-urgent dental treatment that was being offered privately. To add to this there was a 5% increase in NHS dental care charges in England from 14th December 2020, however neither the dentist nor the public benefited from this.

Concerns were raised about the limited availability of NHS appointments; many people have reported struggling to access NHS dentistry for routine care because practices are either not taking on new NHS patients or have no available NHS appointments, and the pandemic has made this even more difficult. Although dental practices have now reopened, many people are still unable to get an appointment for a check-up, hygienist appointment or routine fillings, as most practices continue to treat only urgent or emergency cases. Communication of information about which services (routine and emergency) are available has been confusing and more people have struggled to access a timely and effective service.

On 9th December 2020, the British Dental Association (BDA) issued a press release:

*'The British Dental Association has backed calls from patient champion Healthwatch for the Government to act on the ongoing crisis in dental services in England that has been cast into stark relief by the COVID pandemic.'*

*The BDA reports an unprecedented 452% rise in calls and complaints over the summer about both long-standing and COVID-related issues in dentistry.*

*Between March and the end of August 14.5 million fewer NHS dental procedures took place in England. The BDA has estimated that figure rose to over 19 million by the end of October.*

*Owing to official restrictions, 70% of practices are now operating at less than half their pre-pandemic capacity. 55% of practices estimate they can maintain their financial sustainability for 12 months or less.*

*Prior to the pandemic unmet need for NHS dental services in England was estimated at over 4 million people over 18, or nearly 1 in 10 of the adult population.*

*The widely discredited, target-driven NHS contract - dubbed by the Commons Health Committee as "unfit for purpose" - funded care for little over half the population before the pandemic and prompted a collapse in morale within the workforce.*

*The BDA has urged current Health and Social Care Committee Chair Jeremy Hunt MP to resume the inquiry initiated in the last Parliament that was canned by the snap general election at the end of 2019'.*



British Dental Association Chair Eddie Crouch said:

*‘Sadly ‘business as usual’ in dentistry means postcode lotteries, failed contracts, and underfunding’.*

Healthwatch England undertook a follow-up review of people’s feedback on dentistry, where they looked at a further 1,129 people’s experiences of accessing dental care, received between October and December 2020. They found:

- Access to dentistry remained difficult for more than seven in 10 people (72%).
- Some people who actively sought dental treatment were told they would have to wait anywhere between a few months to, in one case, two years for an appointment.
- Access to urgent NHS treatment was difficult for both people with painful teeth, with patients being told that dental pain was not considered an “emergency”, and those who were prescribed multiple courses of antibiotics by NHS111 without being provided any further treatment.
- Some people said they had called over 40 practices to find an NHS dentist, and pulled their own teeth out when they couldn’t bear the pain.
- When dentists couldn’t offer an appointment, they advised people to buy dental repair kits to treat themselves. In one case, an individual was advised to use a nail file to deal with the sharp edges of a broken tooth.

The full report can be found here: <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/2020-12-09/dentistry-and-impact-covid-19>





# Methodology

In January 2021 Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) developed a survey to seek feedback from patients on their views and experiences of NHS dental care accessed within Central Bedfordshire, both pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey was posted on our website and widely circulated via social media and ran from mid-January to 14th February 2021. Given the short time period, not unsurprisingly, a relatively small cohort of people, total of 116, completed and submitted the survey online.

HWCB's online survey asked 24 questions in total, including two questions relating to demographic characteristics. The first ten questions concerned peoples experience of accessing dental services pre-Covid-19, and the subsequent 12 questions related to accessing dental care during the pandemic. A full copy of the survey questions can be found at [Appendix A](#).

The main questions in the survey included whether regular dental care had been accessed prior to the pandemic, how often, and the distance travelled to the dentist, the type of treatment accessed (NHS or private) and how they would rate the standard of care received.

Additional questions, post Covid-19, included whether they had sought dental care during the pandemic, the type of dental treatment and the cost implications. Feedback was also sought on alternative sources of information, for example, dental websites and NHS 111.

A full analysis of the survey results is given on the following page with additional comments provided by many people who completed the survey online.





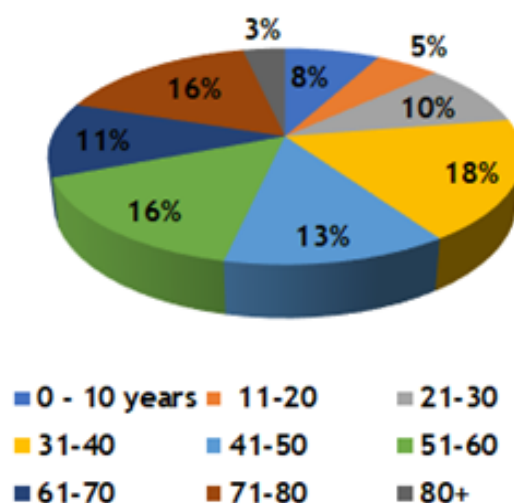
# Analysis of survey results

A total of 116 people completed the survey online with the majority answering all 24 questions however, some people 'skipped' a few of the questions, and some people only responded to the first ten questions, relating to accessing dental treatment pre Covid-19. Only those who had accessed a dentist pre and post Covid-19 answered all questions; total of 85.

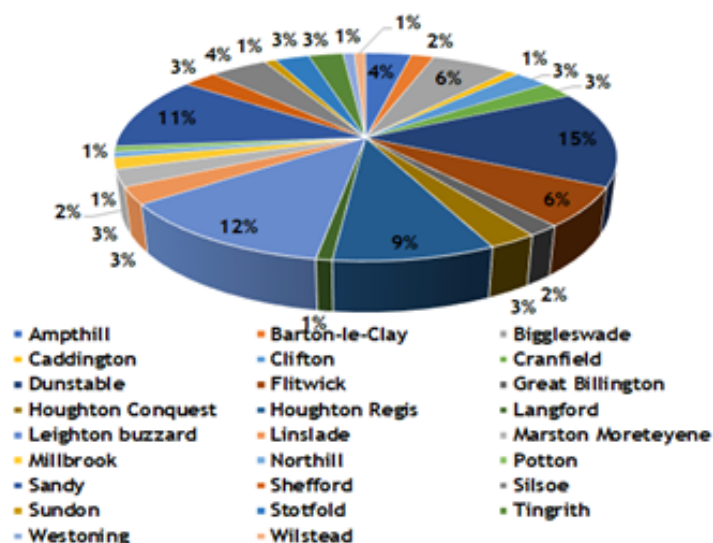
Of the 116 survey responses, 18% of respondents were in the 31-40 age group and the least number of responses were from the 80+ age group (3%). HWCB received the most responses from people residing in Dunstable (15%), Leighton Buzzard (12%), Sandy (11%) and Houghton Regis (9%), and the least number of responses from people residing in Caddington, Langford, Wilstead, Westoning and Sundon (all 1%). A full analysis of age groups and where respondents reside is as follows:



**Question 1:** We asked for participants to provide their age group



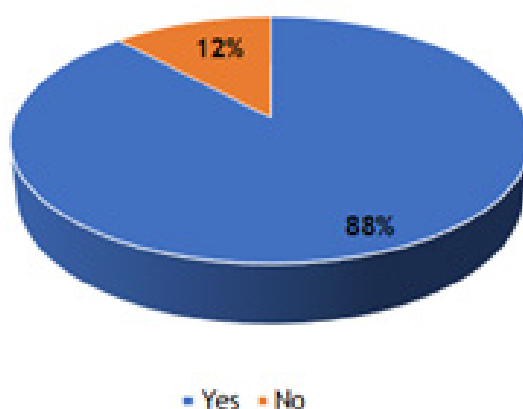
## Question 2: We asked where they lived within Central Bedfordshire



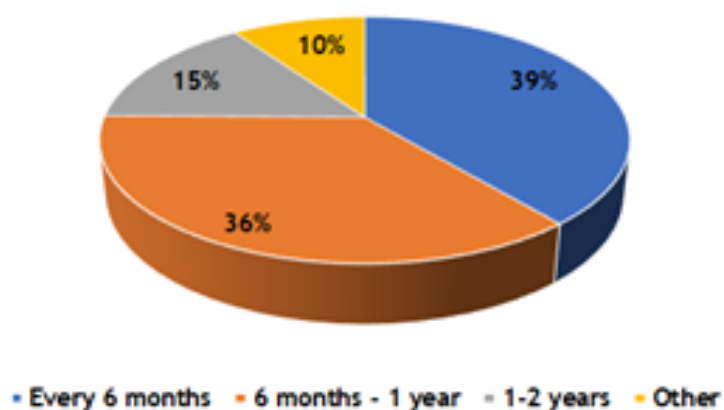
### Pre-Covid Responses

The following responses were received relating to access to dental care prior to the pandemic.

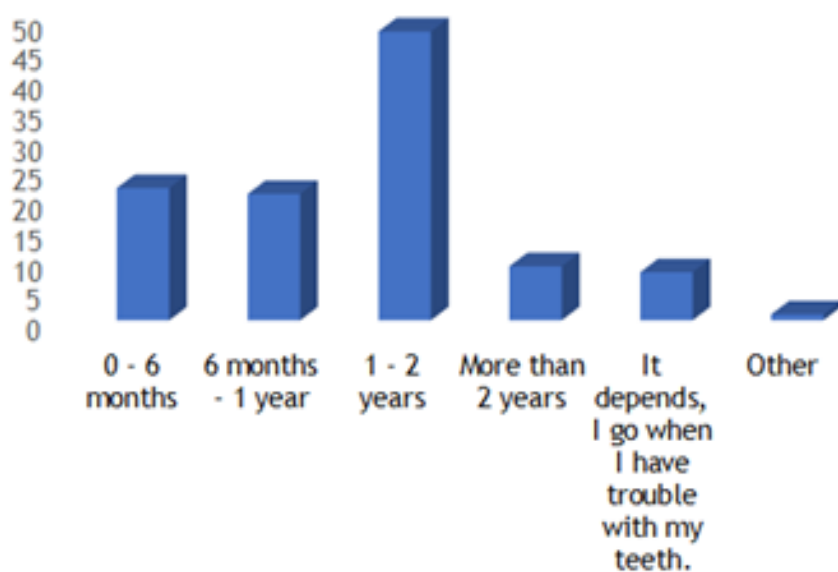
In **Question 3** people were asked, prior to the pandemic, did they receive regular dental care. Unsurprisingly, a large majority of respondents (88%) indicated they had received regular dental care prior to the pandemic with 12% indicating they had not.



In **Question 4** people were asked how often they used to visit a dentist prior to the pandemic. This showed that many people, total of 75% visited their dentist every six months or six months to a year. A further 15% visited every 1-2 years and 10% of respondents indicated a longer period.

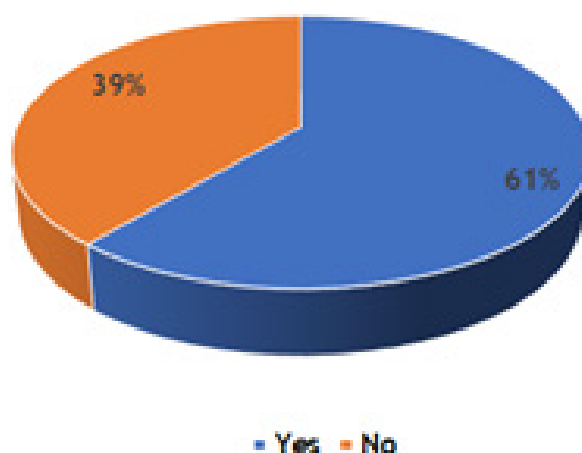


In **Question 5** people were asked when was the last time they had attended a dentist appointment. The majority of people (more than 50), who responded to the survey, indicated this was between one to two years prior to the pandemic. Others were either in the last six months or six months to a year. Only a small amount of people indicated more than two years ago with some stating that they only visited a dentist if they had *‘trouble with my teeth’*.

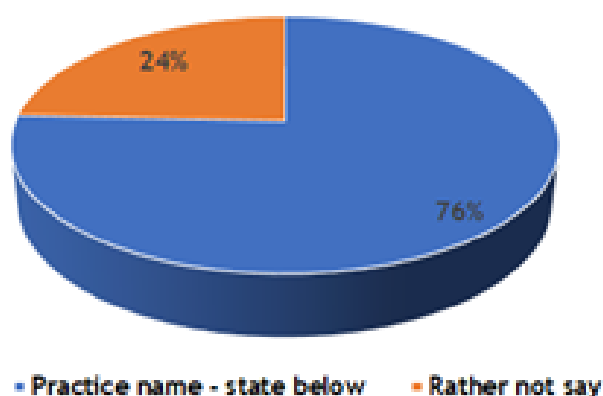


In **Question 6** people were asked whether everyone in their household attends the same dental practice. Interestingly, 69% of respondents indicated that everyone in their household went to the same dental practice whereas 39% indicated they did not. Some of the reasons given why not everyone in the household used the same dentist included:

- *Youngest not registered*
- *Stayed with the dentists we had prior to moving*
- *Only me in household*
- *Wife the same as myself*
- *Child was comfortable, I was not*
- *Partner not registered*

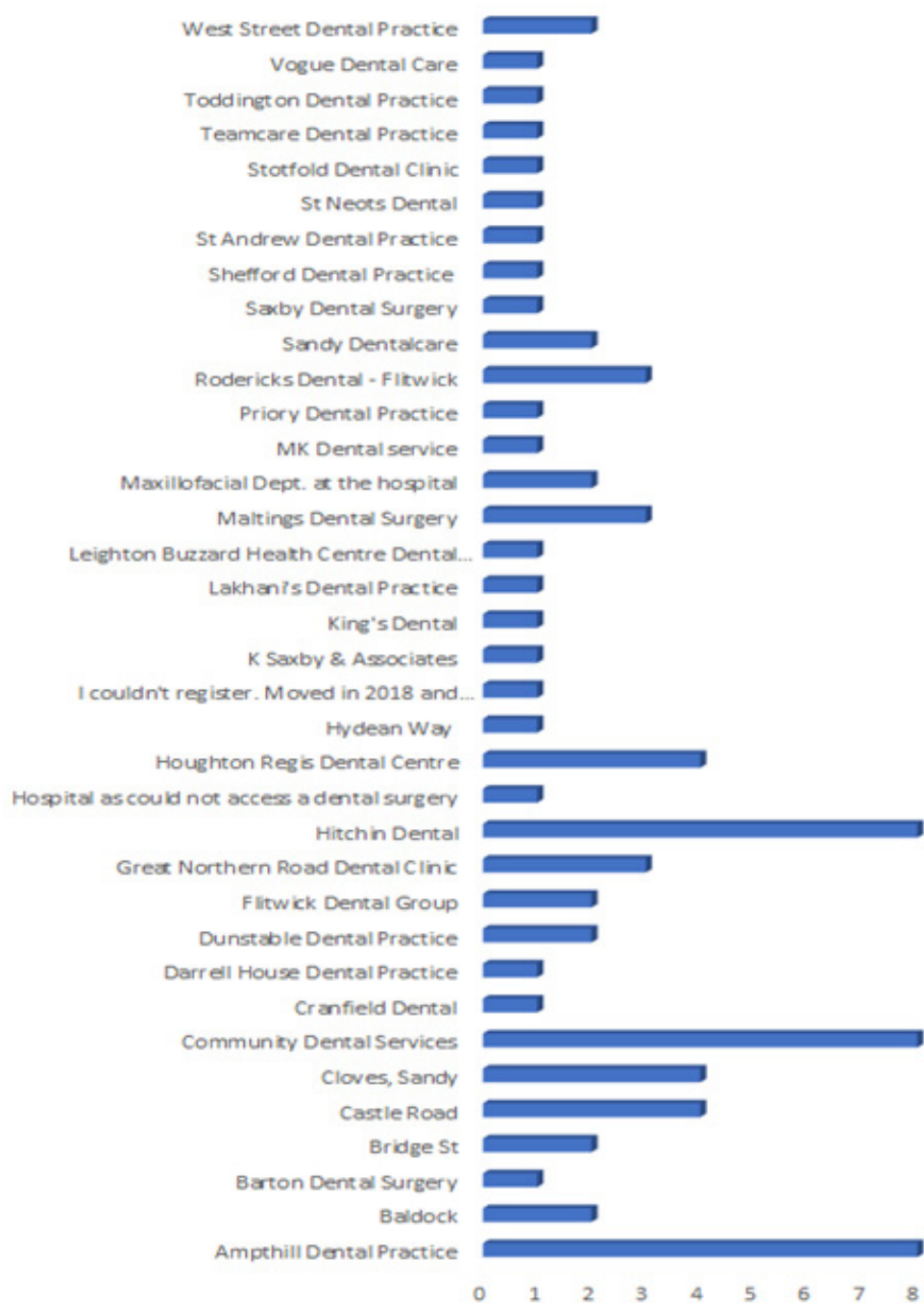


In **Question 7** people were asked what was the name of the dental practice they usually attended. The majority of respondents answered this question (76%), with the most popular being Hitchin, Ampthill and Community Dental Services, but interestingly 24% preferred not to say.

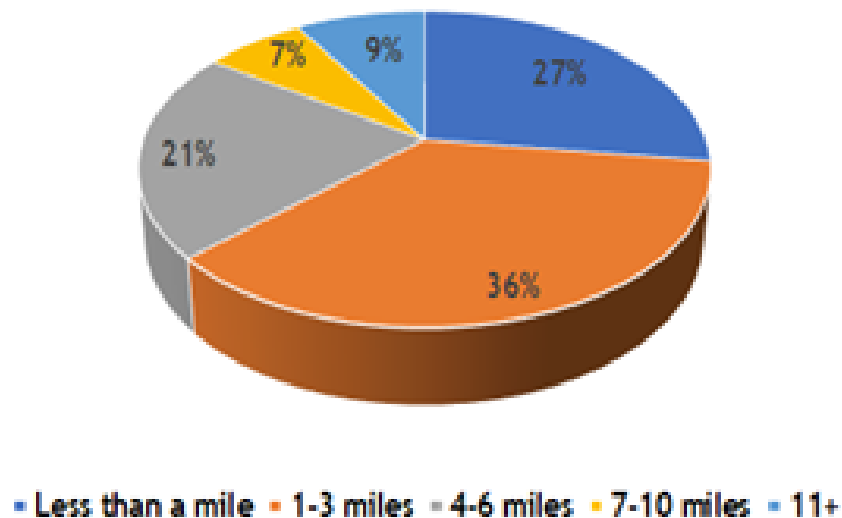




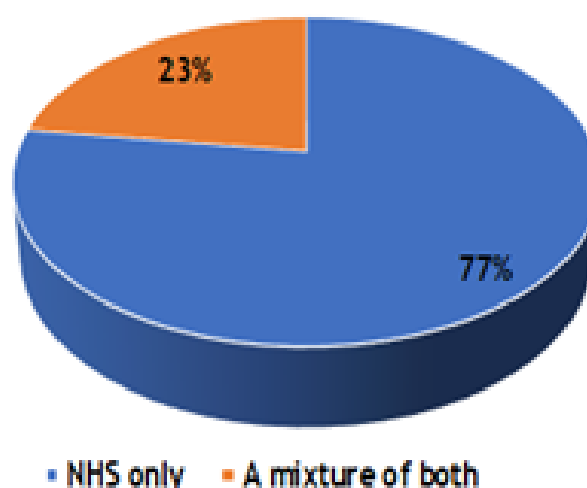
A full list of the dental practices attended by respondents to the survey is indicated below:



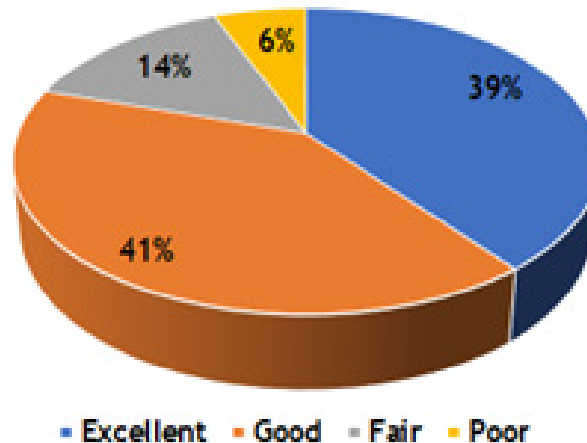
In **Question 8** people were asked how far did they usually travel to attend their dental practice. There were mixed results for this question with 36% who travelled 1-3 miles and 27% who travelled less than a mile. Others travelled further afield, in some cases (9%) over 11 miles or more.



In **Question 9** people were asked whether their dental care treatment was only as an NHS patient or did they receive some treatment as a private patient too. Clearly the majority of people who answered this question only used an NHS dentist (77%) with 23% indicating they used a mixture of both.



In **Question 10** people were asked how they would rate the standard of care they received at their dental practice. Overwhelmingly, the majority of people, total of 80%, indicated they received an 'excellent' or 'good service', with 14% who thought their service was 'fair' and 6% who thought it was 'poor'. One person said that *'Pre-pandemic they were very good, as I am a nervous patient. They worked at my own pace and explained everything throughout the procedure'*.



Additional comments were made in answer to this question, one person said, *'Pre COVID -19 it was always a good level of service'*, others said, *'Both of my children have been seen routinely; I have not had any problems with them being seen'* and *'the practice went the extra mile in all ways'*.

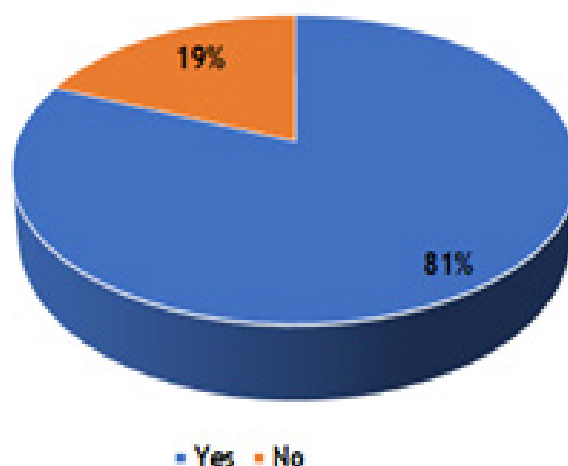
However, not all respondents were happy with the service they received, and one person commented, *'The last two appointments in 2019 were cancelled by the surgery (a common occurrence), after waiting to book a 3rd appointment C19 closed the dentist and I have heard nothing since about re-opening, and when enquiring have been told no appointments are available'*.

Another lady commented on the challenges she experienced because she had not contacted a dentist after moving to a new house - *'I moved to Dunstable in 2018 and stupidly did not sign up to a dentist when I moved. My daughter arrived in the middle of 2018 and my son in late 2019. During my pregnancy I experienced really painful gums, lots of bleeding. I called around four different surgeries during the first lockdown and was told they could not help and were not taking new patients. Only one dentist - Dunstable dental practice gave me a call back but refused to see me. The problem went on for a few months of pain but eventually resolved itself after speaking with doctors instead'*.

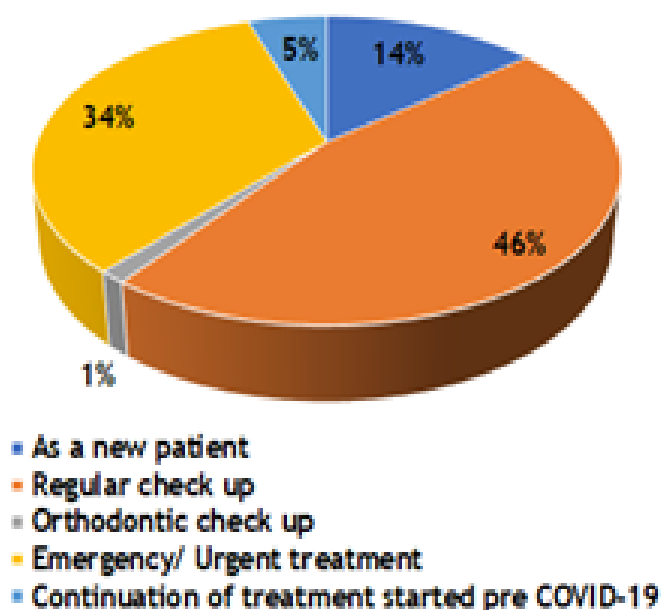
## During the Pandemic

The following responses were received relating to access to dental care during the pandemic:

In **Question 11** people were asked if they had tried to access dental care during the pandemic. Quite unsurprisingly, a large majority of people had - 89% with a small percentage of people saying they had not (19%).

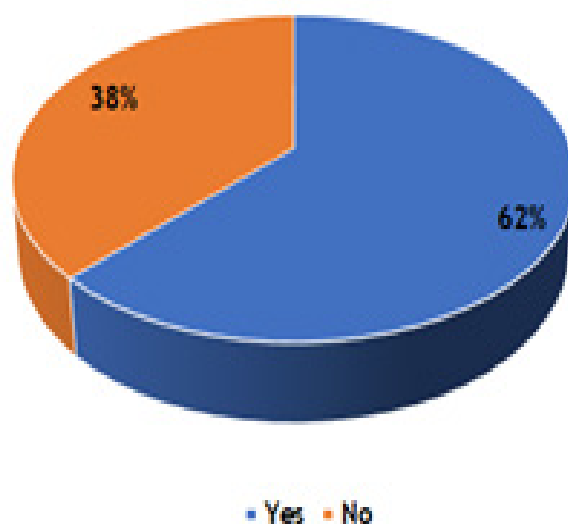


Following up on question 11, in **Question 12** people were asked what type of appointment they were seeking. Interestingly many people were seeking a regular check-up (46%) despite vast media coverage relating to the closure of many dentists with a few offering emergency only treatment. A smaller percentage, 34% required emergency or urgent treatment and 14% indicated they were new patients. A much smaller percentage (5%) indicated that it was for a continuation of treatment prior to C-19 and 1% indicated it was for orthodontic treatment.

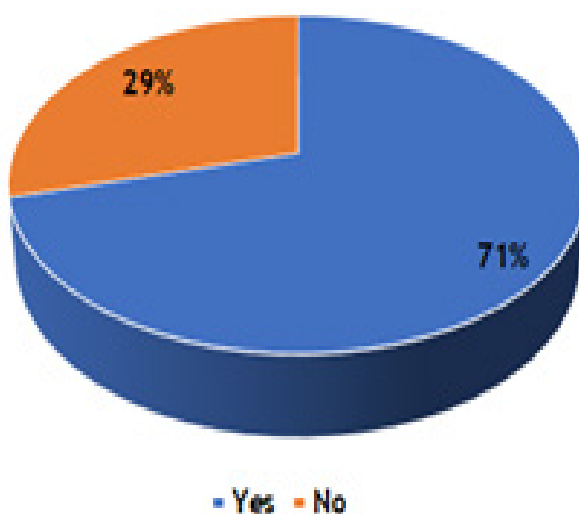




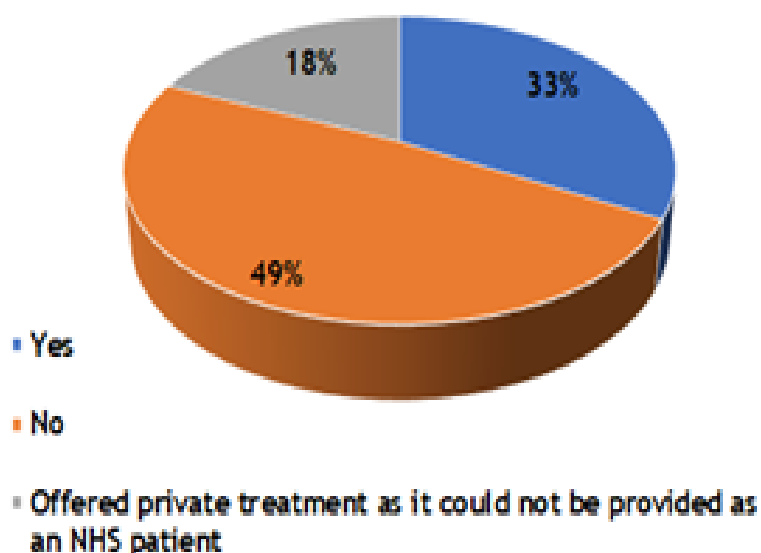
In **Question 13** people were asked whether they had checked the dental practice's website for information and over half the respondents who answered this question (69%) indicated they had, however 39% had not.



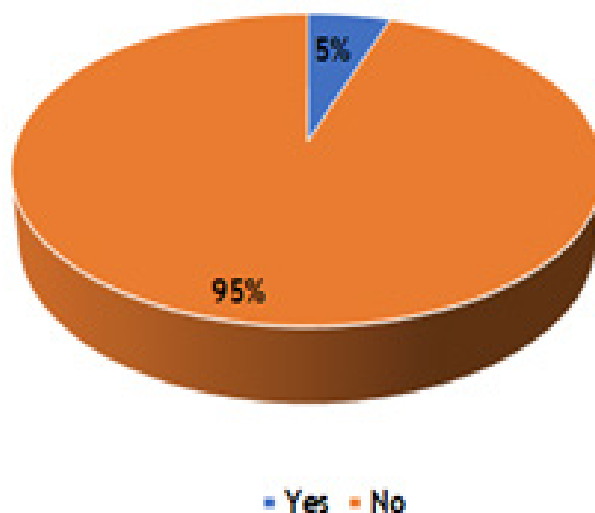
For **Question 14** of those who had checked the dentist website they were asked if the information given was up to date. A fairly large percentage (71%) indicated that it was, with a further 29% indicating it was not. Additional comments given to this question included, *'does not have a website'* and *'No Covid information given when I looked'*. Others stated that the *'Information on the website is always updated regularly'* with some saying they *'cannot remember'*.



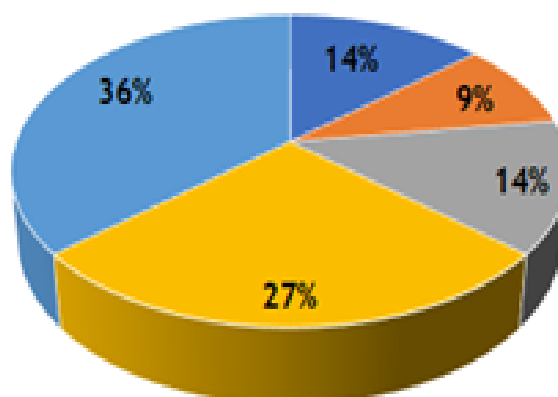
For **Question 15** people were asked if they were able to successfully book an appointment with a dentist with 49% indicating they could not and 33% who said they had managed to book an appointment during the pandemic. Interestingly 18% of people who responded to the survey said that they had been offered a private appointment as an appointment could not be offered on the NHS.



In **Question 16** people were asked, of those who required an NHS appointment, whether they had contacted the NHS 111 service for help. Of the 49% who had previously said they were unable to secure an appointment, only a very small percentage (5%) rang NHS 111 for support whereas 95% did not.





In **Question 17** people were asked, following a dental visit, if they required additional appointments for further treatment, how long did they have to wait. Of those respondents who answered this question, a fairly large majority (36%) had their treatment put on hold due to Covid-19. Others waited for either one or three weeks (14%), or two weeks (9%) with some waiting for longer than three weeks (27%). One person stated that *'I cancelled the appointment because of a new variant (Covid-19), but now re-booked for after my vaccination'* and another said *'I need a hygienist appointment following a routine check-up, no hygienist appointment available for six weeks'*.



- Up to 1 week
- Up to 2 weeks
- Up to 3 weeks
- Longer
- Treatment still on hold due to COVID-19

For **Question 18** people were asked if the NHS 111 service had arranged their dental appointment. Interestingly, all of the respondents who answered this question said 'No' which raises the question whether they were aware that they could have contacted NHS 111 for support.

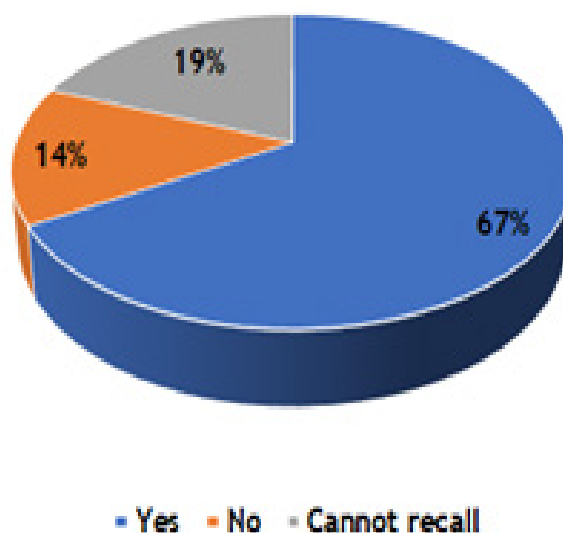




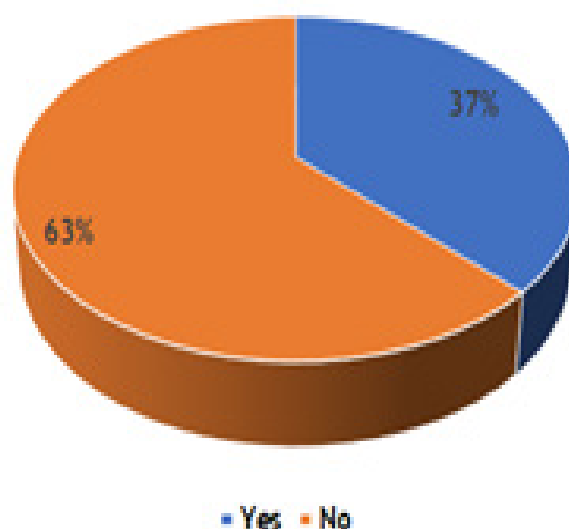
**OPEN**

**If you need urgent dental care or do not have a dentist, get in touch with NHS 111 online or by phone for advice.**

In **Question 19** people were asked if they required NHS dental treatment, were the costs explained beforehand and the majority of people said that they were (69%). Only 14% said they were not and 19% could not recall.

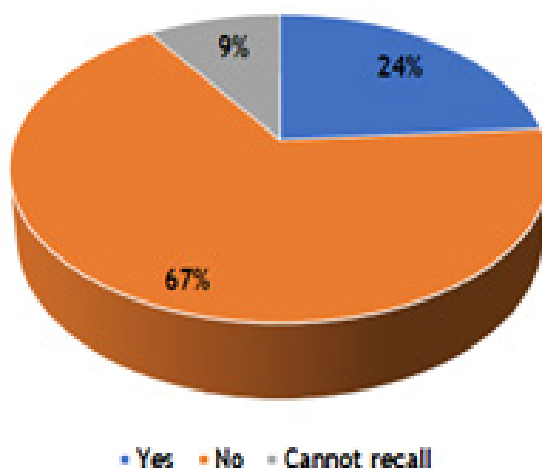


In **Question 20** people were asked if they were offered private treatment if it could not be provided as an NHS patient. Over half the people who answered this question (63%) indicated they were not offered private treatment but interestingly 37% were.

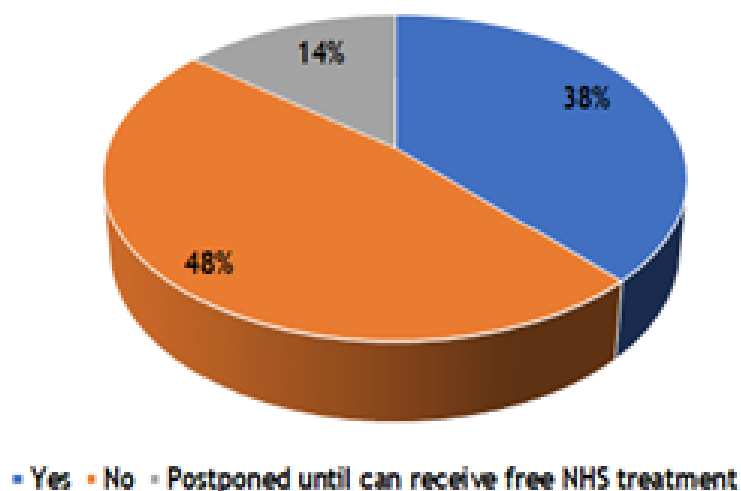




Following up on the previous question, in **Question 21** people were asked if they were given a written quote for additional private treatment (sometimes known as a personal treatment plan) and 67% said they were not provided with a written quotation but 24% were. 9% of people could not recall whether they were given a quote or not.



In **Question 22** people were asked if they had proceeded with private treatment and 38% said they had. A larger percentage (48%) said they had not, and reasons given were mainly financial, as follows, *'I was on short hours, then made redundant (museum sector). I have a mortgage to pay, that had to take priority'* and *'I am unable to afford private treatment as I am on a low income'*. One person said that *'I did not have a choice as I was not registered as NHS but at a practice in Bedford'*. A smaller minority of people who answered this question (14%) said that they postponed treatment until they could receive free NHS treatment.



In **Question 23** people were asked if there were any other comments they wished to add about their experience of accessing dental services during the pandemic. A wealth of comments were received, with many people clearly unhappy with the dental service they have attempted to access since the pandemic. The majority of people, who completed the survey, gave additional comments including, *'My husband required emergency treatment at our dentist, only to be told he had been taken off the NHS list as he hadn't attended in the last six months (this was in November 2020 and couldn't have attended an appointment as dentist hadn't been allowed to operate in the first lockdown and we hadn't required emergency treatment then), we hadn't been informed this was going to happen. However, the other three members of the family weren't taken off! This was explained and they refused to reinstate and no available appointments to do the work for a month'*.

Others commented, *'Over the last few years getting an appointment it has become hit and miss and I seem to pay part NHS and part private for treatment with no logic as I am supposedly an NHS patient for 20+ years. After each check-up I immediately book the next visit, but as they never schedule the dentists' holidays in the calendar there are numerous cancellations and re-bookings before a successful visit is made. The dental care itself seems fine, it's the chaotic and haphazard booking which wastes their and my time. There has also been attempts to make me pay for cancelled appointments when the surgery cancelled them'*.

Many people were very angry that they could not access a dentist during the pandemic and gave the following comments:

*'The practices local to me are not taking on new patients, some with waiting lists of a year, if you can afford to pay privately you would probably be seen, but its hugely expensive and not feasible'*.

*'I have not been able to use my NHS maternity exemption as dentists have been closed/not doing check-ups. We moved to the area days before lockdown in March and have struggled to find a dentist in Dunstable/Luton that are taking on new NHS patients and have been told the waiting list is a year!! I cannot afford private care'*.

*'I think it is disgusting that dentists are not offering proper services for a year. Our teeth have to last our entire lives. I was told I could fill my own tooth at home if it was really bad. No way!'*

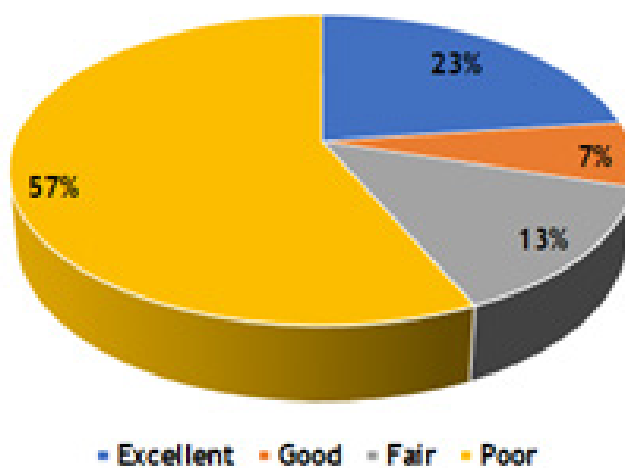
*'Elderly mum has had broken dentures for 2 months. Cannot get them replaced'*.

*'Accessing dental care in the pandemic was impossible with dentist on the phone unwilling to refer to an emergency dentist. I ended up losing a tooth only because I lost a filling. Never had any dental problems before and am now facing expensive treatment to sort it out. I cannot stress enough how traumatic the whole experience was and to know that I lost a tooth for no good reason other than I could not get proper care'*.

A full list of all the additional comments received can be found in **Appendix B**.

Finally in **Question 24** people were asked how would they rate the standard of dental care they received during Covid-19 compared to their previous answer (pre Covid-19) and over half of respondents (57%), who responded to this question, indicated the standard of dental care was 'poor' compared to their treatment before the pandemic.

Of the remaining respondents, a total of 30% rated their care as either 'good' or 'excellent' with 13% who said it was 'fair'. One person who gave further comments in response to this question said *'Prior to lockdown it was great but since then, when I have enquired about a routine check-up, I have been told I cannot have usual NHS check-ups for me and my children but have been offered private which I would need to pay for. I have declined. I paid for a filling in Jan 2020 and tried to get a refund but was not given it, being told that an appointment would be rescheduled. This did not happen until June and it was causing me pain'*.





Lady rang HWCB to explain she recently lost a front tooth and is not registered with a dentist. Having been signposted to the NHS website, she rang 32 dentists within a 26 mile radius of their home. No one taking NHS patients. Had been offered and taken up private appointment - £40 for initial consultation. Is concerned about cost for full treatment.

Information recorded and advised if in pain to use NHS 111 to be directed to emergency dental treatment. Advised to keep checking the NHS dentist information in case practitioners can accommodate new patients.

At the end of lockdown, a patient with a cracked tooth was unable to be seen at their dentist due to a 'backlog' of appointments.

Advised to use NHS 111 if in pain and to call back on a weekly basis to secure an appointment at the earliest possible time.

No dentist availability in the local area after moving into the area.

Advised that will need to search wider than living area and links provided. If have a dental situation that requires urgent treatment to visit NHS111 online.

Family of three children and one adult registered with dentist. Asked to register new baby; now 18 months old - declined. Was offered a private appointment for the child at a cost of £50 which cannot afford.

HWCB directly contacted the dental practice to discuss, awaiting call back in absence of Practice Manager. Issue raised with regional dental network - ongoing issue.



Concern that hygienist costs (for private care) had increased significantly - from £50 to £75. Was advised that the Covid-19 restrictions have caused costs of care to rise.

HWCB advised to shop around, however the costs of increased PPE and cleaning is likely to impact across the board. On a quick website check costs varied from £44-£96, with the average cost being around £60.

Calls received from residents looking for a local dentist who are taking on new NHS patients. Many did not have internet access and were struggling to find information locally. One resident suffered with vertigo and travelling any distance was challenging.

Discussed with those who called the distance willing to travel and provided telephone contact numbers of local practices in their area.

Email from a lady asking for advice on how to get dental treatment as she could not find a NHS dentist taking on new patients.

Advised that if in severe pain, to call NHS 111 who will be able to advise and direct to a dentist to get the treatment needed if deemed necessary. Was also given details of local practices in her area. Lady was very grateful and commented: ***"Thank you so much for looking up and providing this information. I searched myself for dentists, but the search was a bit daunting, so this is all really helpful in our search for a dentist especially regarding the list of dentists who have updated their list recently."***

Call from someone who had seen an NHS dentist and advised that a root canal and a crown is needed but that ***"due to Coronavirus this is not available on the NHS and only available to you privately"***, at a cost of over £1,000. Advice requested on where they stand as on a low income and cannot afford private treatment.

HWCB provided links with details of the costs of treatment in particular bands, and dentistry support available for people on low incomes.

# Summary

People from various villages and towns across Central Bedfordshire completed the survey - a full list can be found on page 13 in Question 7. Of the age range given, the most responses came from those in the 31-40 age group, with the least number of responses from the 80+.

Prior to the pandemic, the vast majority of people who completed the survey, accessed regular dental treatment, having attended an appointment every six months to a year. However, there was a small cohort of people who had not visited a dentist in some time, the reasons given included, *'Only in emergencies due to a fear from a bad experience' and 'unable to cater for my severe latex allergy and other health conditions' to 'can't register' and 'not been for years'.*

When asked if all the members of their household attended the same practice, over half of respondents said all family members did attend the same dentist, although others stated they did not, with a variety of reasons given ranging from *'I live alone'* to *'choice'* and *'can't register'*. Interestingly, the majority of people indicated that their dental treatment was always provided by the NHS and they rated the care received as mostly excellent. Comments included *'Always greeted with a happy smile from all the staff and treated with care and a quality service'* and *'clean, on time, polite, helpful and good with the children'*. However, of the people who rated their NHS care as 'poor' or 'fair', one commented, *'I have had three appointments cancelled since my last appointment there and have to date not been contacted again about another appointment' and 'I did need urgent treatment in early 2020 but was unable to get an appointment. Because of the pain I was in I travelled to Milton Keynes private dental centre which cost several hundred pounds'.*



For the second part of the survey people were asked if they had accessed dental treatment during the pandemic and the majority said they had. However, despite wide media coverage relating to the Covid-19 restrictions for dentists, many people indicated they had sought an appointment for a 'regular check-up' for which, unsurprisingly, they were unsuccessful in securing an appointment. Comments included, *'I am very disappointed not to have had an appointment because I have been a loyal customer of that practice for at least 25 years. I have no idea when my check-up is likely to be and am very concerned about this'* and *'The check-up booked in August was cancelled with a note, please do not call to rebook, we will contact you. But we still have not had a date for our check-up's that are now very overdue'.*

Others indicated they had attempted to seek emergency or urgent treatment and from the responses given, only a few were successful, additional comments given as follows, *'Tried to get an appointment as was suffering with tooth ache and had been told at a previous appointment I would need a root canal. When I phoned, they told me it wasn't an emergency so I couldn't get an appointment. Since then, a filling has come out on the other side of my mouth so I phoned them back and they got a dentist to phone me back, who told me that they wouldn't do any work on me as its emergency appointments only. I asked when does it become an emergency and his response was if your face starts to swell! My face has not started to swell so I have not attempted to call them again as I don't see the point now'.*

When asked if they required a follow-up appointment, how long did they have to wait, the majority indicated that treatment was still on hold due to Covid-19. Almost all respondents said that they had **not** accessed the NHS 111 service for help to secure an appointment. Without further investigation we can only assume this was because they were unaware they could contact NHS 111 to support them.



A large majority of people indicated that they were offered a private appointment when an NHS appointment could not be given which, from the comments received, was very frustrating as many could not afford private treatment. Comments included, *'The practices local to me are not*

*taking on new patients, some with waiting lists of a year, if you can afford to pay privately you would probably be seen but that is hugely expensive and not feasible'* and *'Was offered private, told now it will be at least May. Routine appointment on 20.03.20 was cancelled, will now be nearly two years between check-ups; children and husband at least 18 months'*. Many people also said they were not offered a written quote for additional private treatment, and only two thirds of those who answered this question said they took up the offer of private treatment, with many who postponed treatment until they could secure an NHS appointment. Comments included *'I am unable to afford private treatment as I am on a low income'*.

In comparison, prior to the pandemic 88% of respondents to the survey said they had accessed regular dental care whereas during the pandemic only 33% said that they were able to make an appointment for any type of NHS dental treatment.

Pre Covid-19, 80% of people who responded to the survey rated their standard of dental care as either 'excellent' or 'good' but during the pandemic only 30% of respondents rated their care as either 'excellent' or 'good'. A rating of 'poor' increased significantly from 6% pre Covid-19 to 57% during the pandemic.



# Conclusions

Although many people who completed the survey did give some positive feedback about accessing and using dental services in Central Bedfordshire, the majority of feedback was negative, unsurprisingly this was mostly from feedback given during the pandemic.

Pre Covid-19, the level of 'poor' care was rated low. However this rating has risen significantly during the pandemic as a result of being unable to access NHS routine and emergency care, as well as timely follow up treatment and affordability of both NHS and private treatment. It also appears from our survey results that the use of the NHS111 option for accessing dental care has been unsuccessful and that many surgeries are not taking on new patients.

There appears to be a lack of communication from dental surgeries about when routine appointments would resume, and the surgeries failure to contact people to arrange an appointment when promised.

In addition, the issues raised about 'deregistering' some family members and not others demonstrates that there is some confusion about being 'registered' with a dental surgery.

As the pandemic continues and restrictions remain in place, accessing dental care will continue to cause frustration with many people having only limited access to regular dental check-ups which are likely to cause further issues in the future.





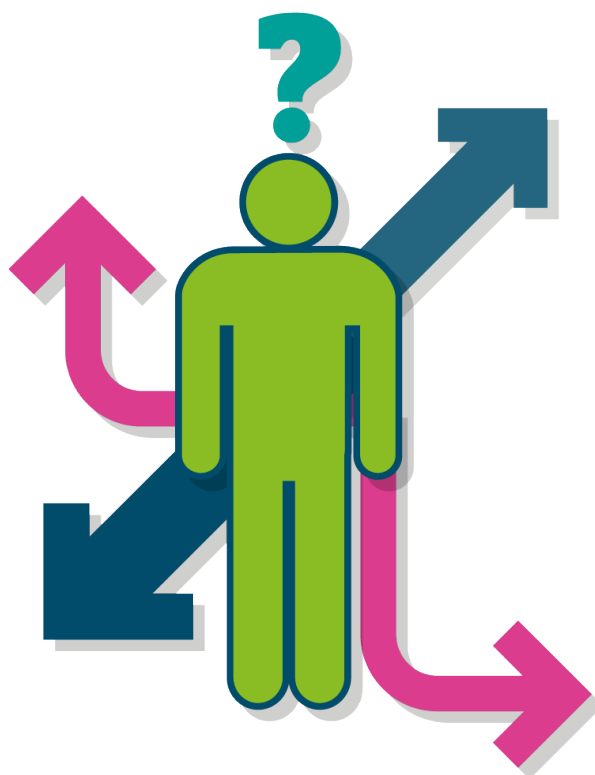
# Recommendations

From the responses given to Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire's survey, it is clear that the results corroborate Healthwatch England's findings in their earlier report, called 'Dentistry: Ongoing issues and the impact of COVID-19', which is that clearer information is needed for new patients, appointments must be provided on a timely and regular basis, and that dental surgery websites are kept up-to-date to reflect this.

In addition, the Government needs to increase resources for dental surgeries to recruit more dentists to support the backlog of patients which has risen exponentially as a result of the pandemic, and to continue to do so after lockdown restrictions have been lifted.

To support those who are unable to afford private dental treatment, provision of short term financial support for patients on a low income, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, is also needed which will enable people to pay for dental care treatment and longer term treatment. Additionally, there needs to be an urgent review of the costs of both NHS and private treatment and NHSE needs to review the efficacy of the NHS 111 service regarding access to dental care treatment.

HWCB will continue to support Central Bedfordshire residents with sign-posting; providing information and feedback regarding dental care and will share this report with key stakeholders and NHS England, to help influence improvements to accessing NHS dental services across Central Bedfordshire.







# Appendix A

## Survey Questions

The survey questions have been divided into two categories covering different time periods to determine the differences in access to dental care for you and your family, before and during Covid-19, as follows:

### Pre Covid-19

**Question 1:** What age bracket are you or the person(s) you were seeking help for?

Tick all boxes that apply.

0 - 10 years    11 - 20 years    21 - 30 years    31 - 40 years    41 - 50 years  
51 - 60 years    61 - 70 years    71 - 80 years    80 + years

**Question 2:** Please tell us which area of Central Bedfordshire you live in e.g. Flitwick, Biggleswade, Dunstable etc.?

**Question 3:** Prior to the pandemic, did you receive regular dental care?

Yes

No

**Question 4:** How often did you used to visit a dentist?

Every 6 months

6 months - 1 year

1 - 2 years

Other (please specify):

**Question 5:** When was the last time you attended a dentist appointment?

0 - 6 months

6 months - 1 year

1 - 2 years

More than 2 years

It depends, I go when I have trouble with my teeth.

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 6:** Does everyone in your household attend the same practice?

Yes

No

If no, please state the reason

**Question 7:** What was the name of the dental practice you usually attended?

Practice name \_\_\_\_\_

Rather not say

**Question 8:** How far did you travel to attend your dental practice?

Less than a mile

1-3 miles

4-6 miles

7-10 miles

11+

**Question 9:** Was your dental care treatment only as an NHS patient or did you receive some treatment as a private patient too?

NHS only

A mixture of both



**Question 10:** How would you rate the standard of care you received at that dental practice?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Any additional comments you would like to make:

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**During Covid-19**

**Question 11:** Have you tried to access dental care during the pandemic?

- Yes
- No

If no, please go to the last page.

**Question 12:** What type of appointment were you seeking?

- As a new patient
- Regular check up
- Orthodontic check up
- Emergency/Urgent treatment
- Continuation of treatment started pre COVID-19

**Question 13:** Did you check the dental practice's website for information?

- Yes
- No

**Question 14:** If yes, was the information up to date?

- Yes
- No

Other comments: \_\_\_\_\_

**Question 15:** Were you able to successfully book an appointment with a dentist?

- Yes
- No
- Offered private treatment as it could not be provided as an NHS patient?

If yes, please go to Q17.

If private treatment offered, please go to Q21

**Question 16:** If not, did you contact NHS 111?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please go to Q18.

If no, please go to Q23.

**Question 17:** Following a dental visit, if you required additional appointments for further treatment, how long did you have to wait?

- Up to 1 week
- Up to 2 weeks
- Up to 3 weeks
- Longer, please provide details \_\_\_\_\_
- Treatment still on hold due to COVID-19

Go to Q19

**Question 18:** Did the NHS111 set up a dental appointment?

- Yes
- No

If no, please go to Q23.

**Question 19:** If you required NHS dental treatment, were the costs explained beforehand?

Yes                      No                      Cannot recall

**Question 20:** Were you offered private treatment if it could not be provided as an NHS patient?

Yes                      No

If no, please go to Q23

**Question 21:** Were you given a written quote for additional private treatment? (sometimes known as a personal treatment plan)

Yes                      No                      Cannot recall

**Question 22:** Did you proceed with private treatment?

Yes                      No                      Postponed until can receive free NHS treatment

If no, please give a reason:

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**Question 23:** Are there any other comments you would like to add about your experience of accessing dental services?

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**Question 24:** How would you rate the standard of care you received during COVID -19 compared to your previous answer (pre COVID-19)?

Excellent  
Good  
Fair  
Poor

If you would like us to contact you regarding any aspect of your feedback, please provide your full name, telephone number and email address below:

Name: 

---

Address: 

---

---

---

Tel No: 

---

Email: 

---

Thank you for completing this survey.





# Appendix B

## Additional survey comments

Question 4: How often did you used to visit a dentist?

*'Every 3 month' (x2 responses)*

*'unable to cater for my severe latex allergy and other health conditions'*

*'not been for years'*

*'various emergency appointments'*

*'cannot register'*

*'Approx. 3yrs'*

*'only in emergencies due to a fear from bad experience when needed'.*

Question 5: When was the last time you attended a dentist appointment?

*'Other - I was due to go shortly after the pandemic hit'.*

Question 6: Does everyone in your household attend the same practice?

*'Could not get on to a Sandy dentist list'*

*'did in old area but new to Central Beds'*

*'cannot register'*

*'youngest not registered'*

*'stayed with the dentists we had prior to moving'*

*'only me in household'*

*'wife the same as myself'*

*'just pre-existing dentist for some'*

*'child was comfortable (I was not)'*

*'preference' (x2)*

*'husband has a private dentist near where he works'*

*'Live alone' (x3)*

*'my wife attends a dentist in Cranfield'*

*'wife stays with long term care dental practice'*

*'my wife has for many years gone to a dentist in Cranfield'*

*'dad worked abroad so struggle to obtain an appointment at short notice as in UK so forced to go private'*

*'husband has a private dentist near where he works'*

*'I have a mentally handicapped and disabled daughter'*

*'partner not registered'*

Question 10: How would you rate the standard of care you received at that dental practice?

*'Pre COVID it was always a good level of service'.*

*'Both of my children have been seen routinely, I have not had any problems with them being seen'.*

*'The treatment and service from the practice I receive is exceptional. I have had emergency service provided on the same day as making the call'.*

*'The last 2 appointments in 2019 were cancelled by the surgery (a common occurrence), after waiting to book a 3rd appointment C19 closed the dentist and I have heard nothing since about re-opening, and when enquiring have been told no appointments are available'.*

*'Difficult to get through the door. Waited outside due to Covid, on a busy street with no distancing, as they did not want anyone inside until the appointment time. Poor dental care. Only good thing was getting a referral to another dental centre'.*

*'None of us are registered with a dentist. We have been without a dentist for 3+ years since moving to Leighton Buzzard'.*

*'The practice went the extra mile in all ways'.*

*'Clean, on time, polite, helpful, and good with the children'.*

*'On AF had bleeding problems. Now have letter from Cardiologist stating when to stop tablets.*

*Note. Dentists and Doctors are reluctant to commit to a timeframe for stopping NOACs despite NHS Guidelines'.*

*'Always greeted with a happy smile from all the staff and treated with care and quality service but treatment failed & could not help with other issues. Needed referral to community dental care'.*

*'The dentist there, Alfie Goosen, was fantastic - apparently he left around one year ago.... I had not been informed of that'.*

*'Always very helpful, kind, and considerate. And Gentle!!'*

*'At this practice routine check-up. I did need urgent treatment early 2020 was unable to get appointment. Because of the pain I was in, I travelled to Milton Keynes Private Dental Centre, cost was several hundred pounds'.*

*'Broke dentures in February 2020, eventually had it fixed in July 2020'.*

*'I have had three appointments cancelled since my last appointment there and have not been contacted again about another appointment but only have a temporary filling and at present not being filled with a permanent filling until at least March'.*

*'Could not get an appt with dentist so had to pay for a Hygienist as had missed 3 appointments because they were only dealing with emergencies. Standard was good once got an appointment'.*

*'Pre pandemic they were very good, as I am a nervous patient. They worked at my own pace and explained everything throughout the procedure'.*

Question 14: If yes, was the information up to date?

*'Does not have a website'.*

*'No Covid information when I looked'.*

*'Information on the site is always updated regularly'.*

*'Cannot remember'.*

Question 17: Following a dental visit, if you required additional appointments for further treatment, how long did you have to wait?

*'A general check-up is not allowed, and I need my teeth cleaned'.*

*'Appointment is for tomorrow, so I cannot answer this'.*

*'Did not require further treatment'.*

*'I cancelled the appointment because of new variant, but now re-booked for after my vaccination'.*

*'Need a hygienist appointment following routine check-up, no hygienist appointments available for 6 weeks'.*

*'Was told about 4 weeks wait but have not heard yet'.*

Question 22: Did you proceed with private treatment?

*'I was on short hours, then made redundant (museum sector). I have a mortgage to pay, that had to take priority'.*

*'I am unable to afford private treatment as I am on a low income'.*

*'Awaiting emergency treatment for an extraction to heal'.*

*'Did not have a choice as was not registered as NHS but at a practice in Bedford'.*

Question 23: Are there any other comments you would like to add about your experience of accessing dental services?

*'They have been great with emergency appointments but for routine appointments for myself and my children we have been told they are not allowing these to happen'.*

*'My husband required emergency treatment at our dentist, only to be told he had been taken off the NHS list as he had not attended in the last six months (this was in November 2020 and couldn't have attended an appointment as dentist hadn't been allowed to operate in the first lockdown and we hadn't required emergency treatment then), we hadn't been informed this would happen this was going to happen. However, the other three members of the family were not taken off! This was explained and they refused to reinstate and no available appointments to do the work for a month'.*

*'The check-up booked in August was cancelled with a note, "Please do not call to rebook, we will contact you". But we still have not had a date for our check-ups that are now very overdue'.*

*'They are happy to see my husband for hygienist appointments as they charge a lot of money every 3 months, and these appointments have continued but they will not see me or my son for routine check-ups'.*

*'Two six monthly check-ups have now been cancelled for myself and son'.*

*'Was told 4 month's waiting for all local dentists from the start of Jan for an NHS appointment'.*

*'I last had a check-up in September 2019. Next check-up was booked for March 2020, which was cancelled and re-arranged for June 2020, which was also cancelled and rearranged for September 2020, which was cancelled and rearranged for January 2021, which was also cancelled. I have given up trying to get another appointment'.*

*'My dentist is only accepting emergency appointments. My entire family has not been able to access a dentist for a check-up in 18 months now, as we were due to see the dentist at the beginning of the first lockdown'.*

*'If you are shielding, clinically extremely vulnerable, and immunosuppressed, have severe allergies that result in anaphylaxis, there is no provision at all for dental care or for any care. The pandemic only added to this situation and it is now worse than ever'.*

*'Over the last few years getting an appointment it has become 'hit and miss' and I seem to pay part NHS and part private for treatment with no logic as I am supposedly an NHS patient for 20+ years. After each check-up I immediately book the next visit, but as they never schedule the dentists' holidays in the calendar there are numerous cancellations and re-bookings before a successful visit is made. The dental care itself seems fine, it's the chaotic and haphazard booking which wastes their and my time. There has also been attempts to make me pay for cancelled appointments when the surgery cancelled them. I cannot understand why some people I know have managed to have a check-up and I have not been able to make an appointment since my emergency treatment in March 2020'.*

*'Only taking emergency patients during covid restrictions'.*

*'Was offered private. Told now it will be at least May. Was cancelled routine appointment on 20/3/20. Will now be nearly 2 years between check-ups, children and husband at least 18 months'.*

*'Regular 6-month check-up cancelled twice'.*

*'I have had three appointments for my regular check-up postponed and am still waiting to hear from the practice when my new appointment will be'.*

*'The Barton Dental Surgery advised me that they are only doing emergency appointments and were not able to tell me when a 'routine appointment' would be available'.*

*'I have had my routine check-up cancelled 4 times due to Covid'.*

*'During first Lockdown my dentist had very restricted access that meant a wait for 4 months. I am very disappointed not to have had an appointment because I have been a loyal customer of that practice for at least 25 years. I have no idea when my check-up is likely to be and am very concerned about this'.*

*'Just that regular care for children's teeth is important and someone should have contacted us by now. Poor service being blamed on Covid, while the staff stand around with no facemasks, as though they are attending a social event'.*

*'Had to wait 2-3 weeks for the appt after telephone appointment. Fortunately, I was not experiencing pain'.*

*'It is a disgrace that appointments will only be offered as private and paid for and not NHS. Very poor service from NHS dentist'.*

*'They were closed. I think it was overkill, they could have been open like others'.*

*'Just hope normal service is resumed as soon as possible'.*

*'Tried to register my 2-year-old daughter with the practice, to be told she has at least 400 people ahead of her on the waiting list. More capacity needs to be added in the local area due to the amount of new housing added'.*

*'My baby is 19 months old and had never yet seen a dentist as I have been unable to register him with any'.*

*'The practices local to me are not taking on new patients, some with waiting lists of a year, if you can afford to pay privately you would probably be seen, but that it is hugely expensive and not feasible'.*

*'Had to make an appointment with my previous dentist, which is out of area, as I could not register at any local dentists in Dunstable who are currently not taking on NHS patients'.*

*'It is impossible to access a dentist in Leighton Buzzard. I have been trying to register for over 3 years. No surgeries within my local area were taking on any new patients so I had to travel 30 miles to the dentist I went to before I moved to Leighton Buzzard'.*

*'I have not been able to use my NHS maternity exemption as dentists have been closed/ not doing check-ups. We moved to the area days before lockdown in March and have struggled to find a dentist in Dunstable/ Luton that are taking on new NHS patients and have been told the waiting list is a year!! I cannot afford private care'.*

*'I think it is disgusting that dentists are not offering proper services for a year. Our teeth have to last our entire lives. I was told could fill my own tooth at home if it was really bad. No way'!*

*'Elderly mum has had broken dentures for 2 months. Cannot get them replaced'.*

*'Accessing dental care in the pandemic was impossible with dentist on the phone unwilling to refer to an emergency dentist. I ended up losing a tooth only because I lost a filling. Never had any dental problems before and am not facing expensive treatment to sort it out. I cannot stress enough how traumatic the whole experience was and to know that I lost a tooth for no good reason other than I could not get proper care'.*

*'Tried to get an appointment as was suffering with tooth ache and had been told at a previous appointment I would need a root canal. When I phoned, they told me it was not an emergency so I could not get an appointment. Since then, a filling has come out on the other side of my mouth so I phoned them back and they got a dentist to phone me back, who told me that they would not do any work on me as its emergency appointments only. I asked when does it become an emergency and his response was, if your face starts to swell! My face has not started to swell so I have not attempted to call them again as I do not see the point now'.*

*'I have two very damaged teeth and was in excruciating pain. Thank God for Boots pharmacy who helped immensely. I was one of four people that day in real pain and no dentist'.*

*'I have had temporary fillings as our dentist is not providing full service due to COVID. I am waiting for a crown to be fitted when possible. I am very concerned about how long I will have to wait for treatment post lockdown due to the backlog of patients like myself awaiting treatment'.*

*'Managed to make an appointment when it was necessary to extract a tooth a few weeks ago, however, do not know if that would have been the case last spring when the pandemic started'!*

*'Waiting for over a year for hospital dental'.*

*'It has been a nightmare. I had a broken tooth and was advised to buy a temporary filling, spent months ringing the surgery in the hope of getting an appointment'.*



*'I was able to get in for an emergency treatment after waiting around a week. However, we had routine check-ups booked for later in February and they have just been cancelled. My kids have not had their teeth looked at for around 18 months now as they were due an appointment, which was cancelled, just before the first lockdown'.*

*'My treatment was put on hold due to the pandemic. Initially I was told that 3 months would not make any difference in regard to delayed treatment however it has now been over a year and I worry that the infection I had has spread more widely as I could not get the treatment I needed, which was to remove the tooth that was causing an ongoing infection'.*

*'Not been able to get an appointment with community dental services. They received referral but now saying I need to be referred again. Not helpful on phone'.*

*'CDS were always very assistive and would try to fit me in whenever they could. I was due to have 'root canal treatment' but due to restrictions that was not possible. Then the second lockdown happened, and I was unable to get another appointment. After that I emigrated'!*

*'I feel like the dentist surgeries are "cashing in" on the pandemic. At the time you could still shop, meet people, and mix with others. You are still able to go to a GP practice and receive NHS treatment, but they charged me £66 for a temporary filling, so the issue still is not resolved, and I cannot have further treatment to fix it as they say they cannot do it due to the pandemic. I have received 5 Covid tests whilst being in and out of hospital. What is to stop a dentist surgery performing a lateral test and if you are negative, they can proceed with fillings, tooth extractions etc? The test results are in within 10-15 mins which you could wait in a side room or a quarantined space within the building. I thought that the treatment I received from start to finish was excellent'.*

*'I cannot express enough how brilliant Darrell House are before and during the pandemic. We have had no problem accessing services, my son's dentist even did a clean as his braces were affecting his teeth. Orthodontic services have not been so great, pre and during the pandemic though. This is Houghton Regis Dental Centre'.*

*'The treatment I have had and continue to have at the practice is second to none'.*

*'Always been good and with little delay'.*

*'Generally satisfied with the service I receive'.*

*'I have always received excellent, caring service from my practice, and they text me when my next appointment is due'.*

*'Regularly attended same dental surgery always excellent care'.*

*'My dad 's private surgery is still doing fillings, hygienist (he went yesterday) etc. My appointment was moved from November to March at present. Temporary filling has stayed in'.*

**Question 24:** How would you rate the standard of care you received during COVID -19 compared to your previous answer (pre COVID-19)?

*'Daughter was due a check-up in August 2020 and has not been able to, baby teeth going, and adult teeth coming and now has not had a check-up for a year'.*

*'Recently had a tooth out they were great'.*

*'I moved to Dunstable in 2018 and stupidly did not sign up to a dentist when I moved. My daughter arrived in the middle of 2018 and my son in late 2019. During my pregnancy I experienced really painful gums, lots of bleeding. I called around 4 different surgeries during the first lockdown and was told they could not help and were not taking new patients. Only one dentist - Dunstable dental practice gave me a call back but refused to see me. The problem went on for a few months of pain but eventually resolved itself after speaking with doctors instead'.*

*'Prior to lockdown great but since then when I have enquired about a routine check-up, I have been told I cannot have usual NHS check-ups for me and my children but have been offered private which I would need to pay for, I have declined. I paid for a filling in Jan 2020 and tried to get a refund but was not given it, being told that an appointment would be rescheduled. This did not happen until June and it was causing me pain'.*

*'Treatment was great but would be kept waiting over an hour every appointment. They would run out of ' NHS ' time to finish/undertake all the treatment I had paid for and would then try to charge me again the next appointment'.*

*'This was an NHS appointment, but I was told my next one would have to be private as I did not visit during the pandemic'.*



# About Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire

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Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is the local consumer champion promoting choice and influencing the provision of high quality health, social care and wellbeing services for all across Central Bedfordshire.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voice of the consumer is strengthened and heard by those who commission, deliver and regulate health and care services. HWCB engages and consults with all sections of the local population so that a wide cross-section of views are heard, understood and acted upon. Everything we say and do is informed by our connections to local people and our expertise is grounded in their experience.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is one of three local Healthwatch in the County of Bedfordshire and belong to a network of local Healthwatch. Healthwatch England leads, supports and guides the Healthwatch network which is made up of the national body and local Healthwatch across each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

Healthwatch is the only body looking solely at people's experience across all health and social care. As a statutory watchdog our role is to ensure that local health and social care services, and the local decision-makers put the experiences of people at the heart of their care.

**healthwatch**  
Central Bedfordshire



# healthwatch

## Central Bedfordshire

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