



Why are people finding it difficult to access NHS dental care in Dorset?

A follow-up report looking at what care is available and how people are affected by a lack of access to treatment

February 2023

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About us

Healthwatch Dorset is your health and social care champion.

We're here to listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and to hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have with the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Dorset is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We cover the geographical area of Dorset, which includes the unitary authority areas of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole and Dorset.



Introduction

Background

We have continued to see a spike in enquiries about accessing NHS dental care in Dorset since we reported on the crisis a year ago in February 2022: [Accessing NHS dental care in Dorset](#). We wanted to understand why people are still having difficulty getting the dental care they need.

What we did

A team of seven Healthwatch Dorset volunteers called every dental practice in Dorset to ask the following questions:

- Are you registering new NHS patients?
- Have you become a solely private practice?
- Do you have a waiting list? If so, how long is the waiting list?
- Are you taking on new NHS Patients that are children?
- Are you taking on new NHS Patients that are pregnant?
- Are you taking on new NHS Patients that are having or finishing cancer treatment?
- Are you taking on new NHS patients with additional needs?
- Are existing patients having normal routine appointments/check-ups?
- Are you accepting NHS 111 referrals?



This report presents findings from our snapshot research on the provision of dental treatment in Dorset at the end of 2022, registered and unregistered people, and the experiences of those trying to register with an NHS dentist. (Key findings, page 5)

Through our information and signposting service, we also hear from people daily about the challenges they face accessing local dental care. We reviewed public feedback and this report highlights key issues that have been raised with us. ([What people told us, page x-y](#))

Healthwatch England evidence

Lack of access to NHS dentistry has been an issue for a long time

The lack of access to NHS dentistry has been an issue raised by the Healthwatch network ever since it was formed. Initially, people in certain parts of the country – often areas of deprivation – regularly fed back concerns about the lack of available NHS appointments.

The Covid pandemic exacerbated issues

During the pandemic, these problems were exacerbated. Between July and September 2020, 1,313 people from 142 council areas across England shared their experiences of NHS dentistry – compared with 238 over the previous three months. Seven in ten people (73%) found it difficult to access help and support when needed it, compared to just over one in ten (11%) who could access care easily. (Source: [Healthwatch England – What people are telling us July–Sept 2020](#))

Those on low incomes and minority ethnic backgrounds find it harder to afford treatment

In February 2021, 2,019 adults based in England responded to an online poll. This identified that people in socio-economic groups D and E, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds found it harder to afford NHS dentistry, sometimes leading to them avoiding treatment. (Source: [Healthwatch England News, May 2021](#))

Difficulties getting up-to-date information about practices taking on NHS patients

In December 2021, [Healthwatch England reported](#) on 8,019 people's experiences of NHS dentistry between April 2020 and September 2021. Significant access problems were a key theme, including difficulties in getting up-to-date information about practices taking on new NHS patients. There were consistent examples of people living with ongoing pain, but also extreme stories of people resorting to pulling out their teeth or using temporary fillings on a regular basis.

On 19 July 2022, [NHS England announced changes to the dental services contract](#) including:

- Improved payment to encourage dentists to take on more complex cases
- Flexibility about which dental professionals will be able to provide treatment, freeing up dentists' time
- Where dentists do not deliver as many units of dental activity (UDAs) as their contract allows, the funding for unused capacity may be transferred to other dental practices that can provide additional appointments.

Healthwatch England will continue to monitor feedback to find out whether these changes are making any real improvement for people – particularly children as well as adults who require urgent treatment. They will also continue to work with NHS England to ensure that people's views are able to influence the future of NHS dentistry.

Although Healthwatch England welcomes NHS England's recent changes to the dental contract, further reform is urgently needed to fix the issues.

Key findings

We contacted all 93 NHS dental practices in Dorset listed on the NHS web directory. 78 responded, two did not respond because they were no longer practicing, and 13 did not respond, despite being called three or more times and being sent a letter about the research. These are the findings from our snapshot research.

- There are no dentists currently taking on new NHS adult patients.
- Two dental practices have closed since last year, bringing the total dental practice number in Dorset down from 95 to 93.
- 17 practices informed us they are now entirely private.
- 18 dental clinics told us that they are accepting new NHS patients if they are children; seven practices told us they are accepting patients with additional needs.
- 23 practices said that they had a waiting list, all with varying lengths; some did not know when their waiting lists would open.
- 50% of practices that responded said their waiting list was over 12 months.
- 75% of practices that responded said their patients were receiving routine check-ups and appointments.
- Interestingly, out of the practices that had become solely private, most said they would accept an urgent referral from NHS 111.

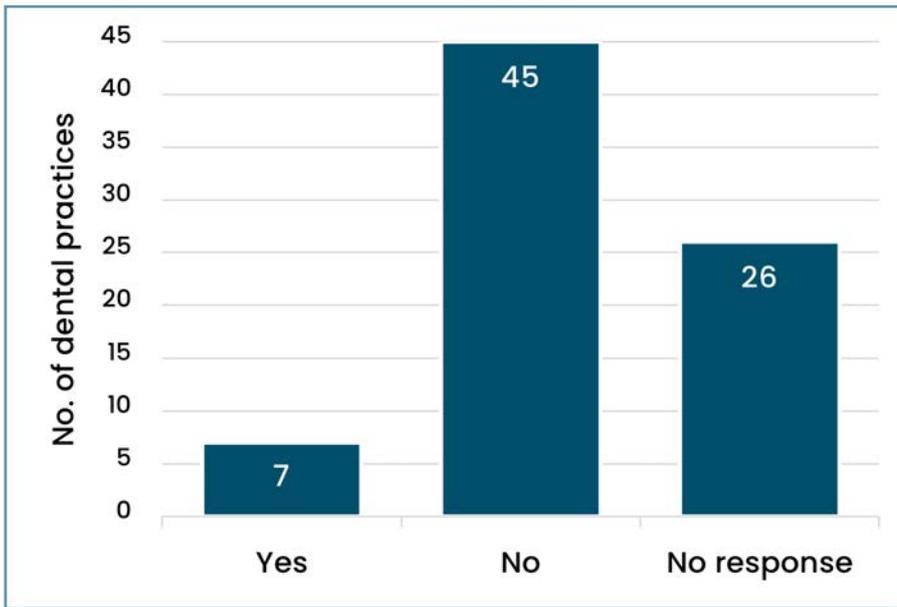


We moved back to Dorset in June 2020. We have been unable to find an NHS dentist at all, let alone one that is local to us. My daughter was under an orthodontist but was discharged when we moved as we were out of area. Now she's 18 and her wisdom teeth are growing causing discomfort and she is worried that all the work from having to wear retainers from age 8 till 11 will be pointless. But still can't find a dentist. We cannot afford to see a private dentist especially now with the cost of living spiralling. We need a dentist locally due to work for all of us and my daughter does not drive. What are we supposed to do?



People with additional needs

Figure 1: Are you taking on new NHS patients that have additional needs?

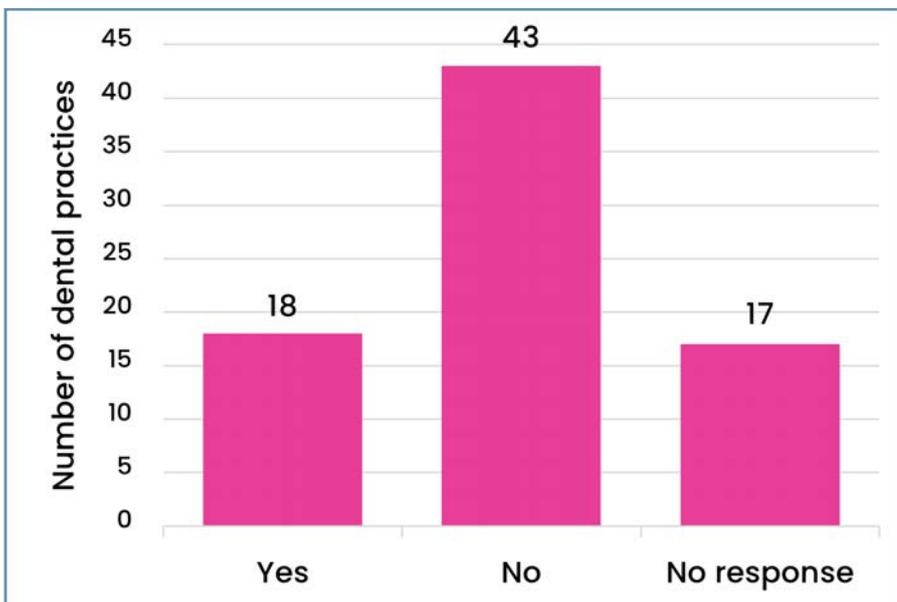


After many many months of searching and calling and emailing different dentists I am yet to find one taking on NHS patients. I have a severe need to see a NHS dentist as I'm really unable to eat because of the loss and pain which has led to weight loss and other health complications. I am a young adult who doesn't work currently due to disability and illness and am unable to pay for private dentistry treatment which I have explored too. I am aware that I will most likely need extensive treatment, possible surgery, and full mouth dentures. I am happy to travel anywhere to see an NHS dentist who is willing to take me on.



Dentists accepting children as new NHS patients

Figure 2: Are you taking on new NHS patients that are children?





I have a boy (eight years old) and a girl (15 years old). Before moving here from Ipswich my children had an NHS dentist, but as soon as we moved here, I have been in many dental clinics and they don't accept anybody through NHS, not even my children. How do I get to take my children to the dentist now? A few places even offered a possibility of private but it is mega expensive, otherwise I was told the waiting time is three years.



The map in figure 3 shows dental clinics in Dorset that were accepting children as new NHS patients. None said they were accepting adult patients, unless they were very elderly or had additional needs. There is a real gap in provision in the far West of the county, the North, and Purbeck areas.

Figure 3: Map location of practices accepting children as new NHS patients



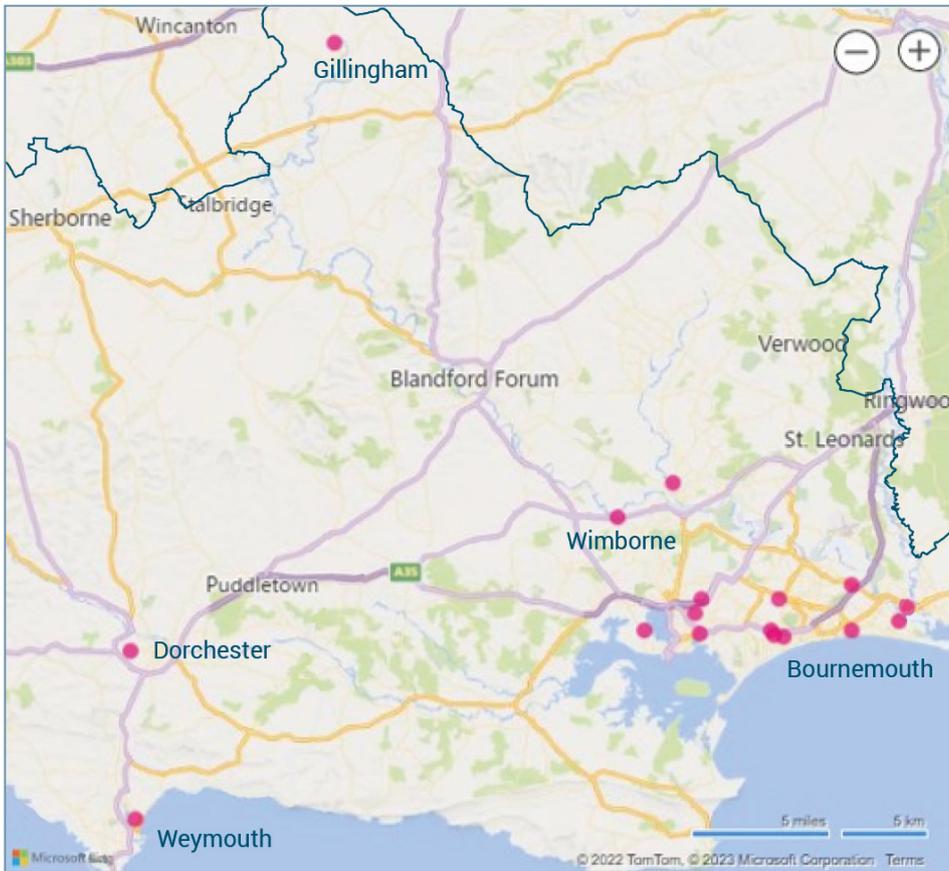
Map credit: 2023 Microsoft Corporation



Private dentists still listed on the NHS website

This map shows dental practices that are listed on the NHS website, although they told us they now only see private patients.

Figure 4: Map location of practices listed on NHS website that now only see private patients



Location of NHS dentists in Dorset

This map shows the 93 dentists registered on the NHS website, indicating a gap in provision in Purbeck, North-West, mid and North-East of the county.

Figure 5: Map location of practices listed on NHS website



What people told us

People tell us they cannot find an NHS dentist in Dorset for either urgent or routine appointments. We have heard from people who are suffering from ongoing pain and unresolved dental issues because they have not been able to access treatment through the emergency dental hubs or through an NHS dentist. Delays are causing significant pain, inconvenience and worsening dental problems requiring further treatment.

These following stories reflect the range of feedback we gather about dentistry in Dorset and they highlight how a lack of access to NHS dental care is having a significant impact on local people's health and wellbeing.

Sam's story

A lack of NHS dental treatment is causing excruciating pain and mental health difficulties



I am in urgent need of a NHS dentist. I find my gums/teeth bleeding throughout the day on a daily basis. It's likely I have gum disease but it's causing alarm along with the excruciating pain I have from them which I can't bear much longer. I'm in need for many fillings and possibly root canal treatment.

I went to a private dentist about three or four months ago and they quoted me for over £2,000 which I can't afford and that is just fillings. I have called dentists constantly over the past month and I cannot find one anywhere. The dentists I have spoken to on the phone told me they have not heard of any dentist locally offering treatments to new NHS patients. I'm going to university in September and I'm only 22 years old and I'm in such a difficult situation which has caused damage to my mental health.

Omid's story

An Iranian asylum seeker, in pain and struggling to eat due to dental problems

Omid is an Iranian asylum seeker living in Bournemouth. He's in pain, finding it difficult to eat, and he is very bothered when drinking cold water.

Because I don't have teeth I can't eat food completely, so I swallow like that, this made problem for my stomach.

He has been trying to find an NHS dentist for eight months. The members of his church in Bournemouth and some Iranian friends have been helping him.

I know that asylum seekers are entitled to health care but I am trying to find where he can access this, please can you help me?



Maria's story

Trying for over a year to get dental treatment for her sons after their dentist de-registered them

 We are a Spanish family who have lived in Bournemouth for five years. I have two boys, Jonathan, 13 years old, and Unay, six years old.

I started taking my son to the dentist in 2020 because his back teeth were quite dark. It was his first time; my son was very scared and after the dental clinic tried to work with him with different methods such as an oxygen mask to relax him, nothing was successful.

We were told my son needed a deep oral cleaning and removal of a milk tooth, but with my son's fear it was impossible to do that in the clinic. So, they told me to take him to the Dorset Country Hospital (Dorchester) in 2021, which is a hospital specialised in these cases, and my son would have all this done in the operating room and with general anaesthesia - everything went very well. At the hospital they told me that in six months I would have to go back to his usual dentist to see how his teeth have evolved after surgery.

I contact the clinic and they told me that my son no longer belongs to that clinic, that he hasn't been to appointments in a long time. I try to explain to the girl on the phone everything that has happened and that at the hospital they tell me to contact his usual dentist, but the girl on the phone hangs up on me. So I call back and explain again and she tells me that they are very busy and that my son no longer belongs to that clinic. Despite my English, which is not very fluent, the girl was not pleasant at all. They didn't even want to help me with all this and since then I have been looking for a dentist all over Bournemouth. I have called many clinics and none of them accept my son, this is very sad for me and for my son as he is now a teenager and has his teeth a little misshapen and in need of a dentist.

My other six year old son has already lost a lot of baby teeth, and I think he should have his first appointment with a dentist, but we couldn't find one for him either. All this is very sad for us because he may have problems with his teeth and with the passage of time all this will get worse.

I hope this changes soon. We have been trying to find a dentist for a year and it is an odyssey.



Recommendations

We have reflected on the recommendations we made in our February 2022 report, *Accessing NHS dental care in Dorset*, the more recent findings in this report, and national research from Healthwatch England. We are making the following recommendations to help NHS Dorset and NHS England understand why change is needed and how improvement can be made.

1. A more rapid and radical reform is required of how dentistry is commissioned and provided – recognising that the current arrangements do not meet the needs of many people who cannot access NHS dental care in a timely way and acknowledging issues faced by the dental profession.
2. Use the commissioning reform (announced by NHS England in July 2022), to tackle the twin crises of access and affordability – ensuring that people are not excluded from dental services because of lack of local provision or difficulty meeting charges. Currently, there are significant inequalities that must be tackled. New arrangements should be based on maximising access to NHS dental services, particularly reducing inequalities.
3. Greater clarity is needed in the information about NHS dentistry – improving information, including online, so that people have a clear picture of where and how they can access services, as well as the cost.
4. Look at using dental practices to support people’s general health – harnessing opportunities, like the development of Primary Care Networks, to link oral health to other key issues, such as weight management and smoking cessation.

Next steps

We have shared this report with NHS Dorset, local councils, the Dorset Local Dental Committee, South West Dental Commissioning Team and NHS England to highlight the difficulties faced by people trying to access NHS dentistry across Dorset. We have also shared our report with Healthwatch England to support their ongoing call for reform of dental care.

We are now working with NHS Dorset to help inform service plans for improving access to NHS Dentistry and improving oral health across Dorset. Poor access to NHS dentistry and negative experiences of services can be commonplace for people who experience health inequalities. We will be working with the local voluntary sector and communities to ensure that we proactively focus on inequitable access in our ongoing engagement work.

The outcomes from this project will give NHS Dorset a better understanding of local need and community assets and inform planning for access to dental services and improving general oral health, in preparation for delegated commissioning from April 2023.

In the next couple of months we will be holding focus group discussions with local dental staff, public health colleagues, schools, health visitors working on oral health programmes, the local voluntary sector, and people who have shared their stories with us. We will report on our findings.

To receive regular updates please subscribe to our monthly E-bulletin: mailchi.mp/86841107a80e/dorset.



Stakeholder response

NHS Dorset Integrated Care Board

David Freeman

Chief Commissioning Officer



NHS Dorset wants to help all people to live longer, happier and healthier lives – and this work starts with people and communities. We want to listen, to learn by trying to understand people's lived experiences, and to design services with local people to meet their needs.

This research by Healthwatch couldn't be more timely. It shows that the consequences for people and their families of not being able to access or pay for dental care can be terrible. Together with the widening inequalities captured in the report and the lifelong impact on children and families, this report is nothing short of a vital call to action.

As many people will already know, this is not an easy problem to fix. The Healthwatch Dorset report shows evidence of steady decline in services over many years, despite ongoing efforts at improvement. But from April 2023 there are going to be changes in how dental services in Dorset are planned and managed. For the last ten years, dental services have been managed across the whole of the South West region, which includes Dorset, by NHS England. On the 1st April the responsibility for Dorset services will move to NHS Dorset Integrated Care Board.

This means we will have a much greater opportunity to work with local people, dentists and other specialists in our area to develop new and different ways of working. We've started this work – from helping children and families with good dental hygiene to designing extra services to meet more complex dental needs, we are already developing plans for improvements over the coming year.

NHS Dorset will be working closely with the existing dental regional team and dental clinical networks, who have developed the South West Dental Reform Programme. Recent developments that have been put in place in Dorset include a child-friendly dental pilot practice in the Wareham area, an additional 100 urgent care appointments every week across the county and a stabilisation programme with initially 30 appointments every week for people who do not have a regular dentist. We are looking forward to contributing further to these exciting plans which include greater numbers of appointments for people who don't have a regular dentist and are in need of treatment, more urgent care appointments, more child-friendly dental practices, dental training hubs to develop the NHS dentistry workforce for the future and digital referrals, improving the way dental practices and dental specialists in hospitals refer patients for further care. All of these plans set us in a good position to drive forward improvements for Dorset.

The big issue of getting more dentists to come and work in Dorset and offer NHS dental care is also a high priority. We are already having very encouraging conversations with the Local Dental Committee (who represent dentists working across Dorset) to try and overcome some of the issues that make it difficult to run NHS dental services. This will take time and will require some national changes as well, but by starting now we can get to some improvements much more quickly.

Our approach over the next two years will therefore be a combination of working to meet the most urgent needs while at the same time finding new ways of working and providing care to give our communities the access to NHS dental care they need.

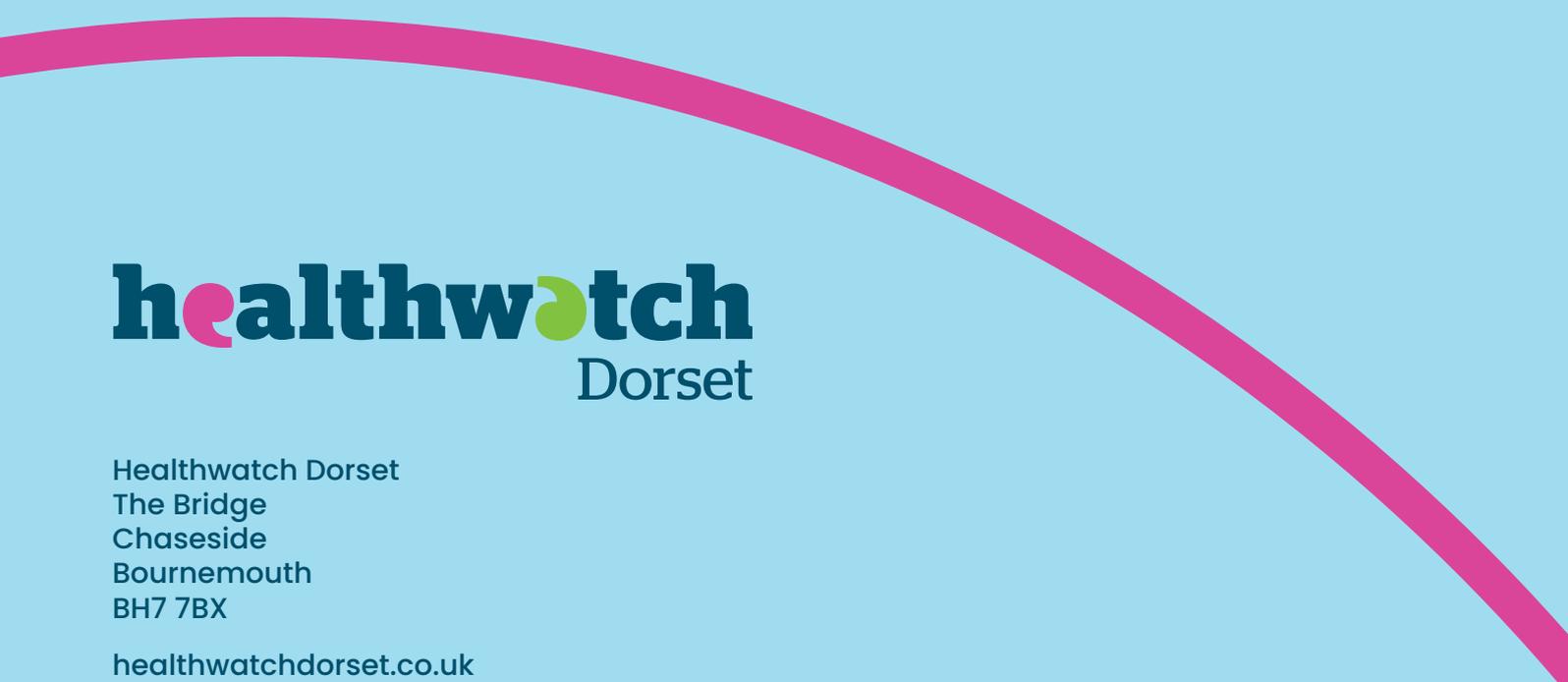
Throughout all this work, we will continue to seek out people's experiences and ideas for improvements and to use this to inform our plans. And we are delighted that Healthwatch Dorset have agreed to work in partnership with us to over the next year to help us do this.

We are grateful to Healthwatch Dorset for shining a light on these important issues and in a way that brings home the real impact on people's lives. It is a vital report that demands our attention and we will use it alongside our new responsibilities to start the journey of improvements that we urgently need to see.

Thank you

We would like to thank everyone who shared their experiences with us - without you we would not be able to do the work that we do. We would also like to thank our dedicated volunteers for phoning each dental practice.





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