



# Dentistry in Greenwich

**healthwatch**  
Greenwich

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## Introduction

We receive regular feedback about NHS dentistry services, and we know that people tend to come to us when things are not working well. However, we know that this is not always representative of how most people experience NHS dentistry services. As a result, we carried out a small survey to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Greenwich residents experience NHS dental services and why they feel the way they do.

One important theme we expected could come up in people's responses was the impact of long waiting times. According to the British Dental Association (BDA), 1000 dental surgeries in the UK had a waiting time of a year or longer for NHS patients.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in over a third of local authorities, there were no practices that were accepting any new adult NHS patients.<sup>2</sup>

Given this context, we wanted to hear from Greenwich residents to find out about their personal experiences of NHS dentistry and give them the opportunity voice their perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bda.org/news-centre/blog/Pages/NHS-dentistry-have-we-reached-the-point-of-no-return.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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## Methodology

In 2023, we surveyed 161 Greenwich residents using face-to-face interviews to gather their experience and opinions about local NHS dental services. Residents were interviewed in a range of venues including community centres, libraries, children’s centres, and health/care venues - with each interview taking up to ten minutes. Although small in number, our sample reflected the diversity of Greenwich residents.

Ethnicity					
Asian, Asian British	Black, Black British	Mixed ethnic groups	White(any)	Other ethnic groups	Prefer not to say
12	71	17	54	2	5
161					

Gender		
Woman	Man	Prefer not to say
113	44	4
161		

Disability/long term condition (LTC)		
Living with disability or LTC	Not living with disability or LTC	Prefer not to say
26	130	5
161		

Age				
Under 24	25-49	50-64	65+	Prefer not to say
19	86	30	23	3
161				

Carer		
Carer	Not a carer	Prefer not to say
20	129	12
161		

## Limitations

While our survey captures the experiences of a cross section of Greenwich residents, it is a small sample of 161. As such, we do not suggest that insights gathered are representative of all who use NHS dentistry services in Greenwich.

We have combined some ethnic groups to create broader categories. These categories are based on Census data for Greenwich<sup>3</sup>, and they allow us to have enough respondents in each ethnic group to conduct analysis. However, combining groups for the sake of analysis risks masking the differences in experiences between groups.

Open-ended responses were manually coded to allow for an overview of people's experiences and to see whether any common themes emerged. However, it is important to note that this can reduce the specificity and uniqueness of people's responses and does not reflect the full breadth of experience.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E09000011>

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## **Summary of Findings**

Long waiting times for NHS dentistry services were the primary issue impacting people's experience and perceptions, with variations based on age and ethnic background.

Greenwich residents had mixed perceptions of how easy or difficult it is to get an appointment with their dental surgery, with the majority saying that it was 'somewhat easy'. However, most respondents held a positive sentiment towards their dental surgery, which is somewhat consistent across demographic groups. Again, age and ethnic background were the primary source of variation in answers. The quality of service seemed to be the most significant factor influencing people's sentiment.

A number of respondents found it difficult to register at or contact a dental surgery at all. Difficulty securing an appointment was a key reason cited by those who held negative sentiment towards their dental surgery.

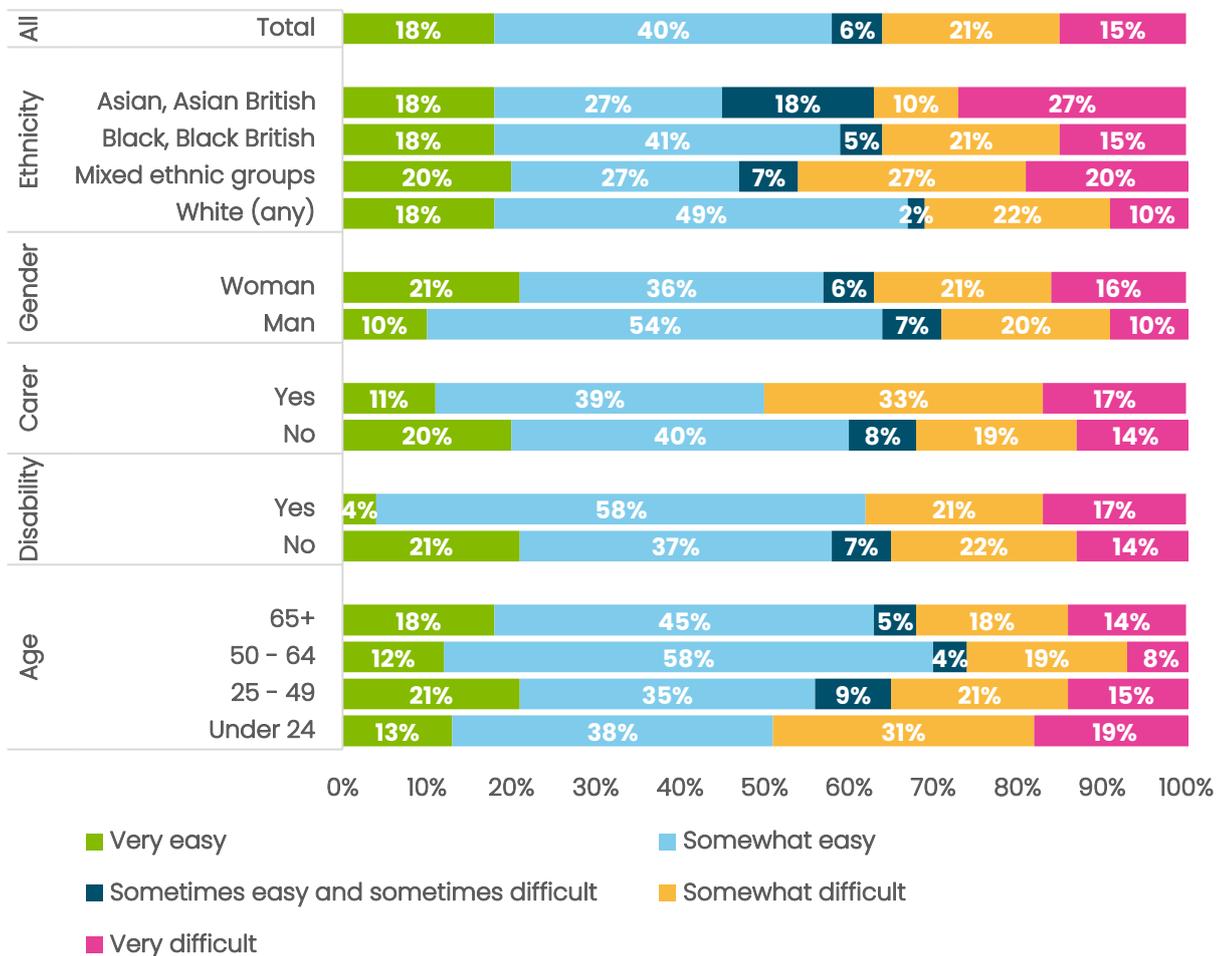
# Results of Dentist Survey

## Appointment

Ease or difficulty of getting an appointment is mostly evenly split but the majority of people say that getting an appointment is somewhat easy. Our survey found:

- Younger people under 24 tend to find it more difficult (50% somewhat or very difficult) while this decreases for those above 25 (over 50% somewhat or very easy).
- There is also a divide based on ethnicity. 67% of white respondents find it somewhat or very easy, compared to 45% of Asian respondents and 47% of respondents from mixed ethnic groups.

### How easy or difficult is it to get an appointment?



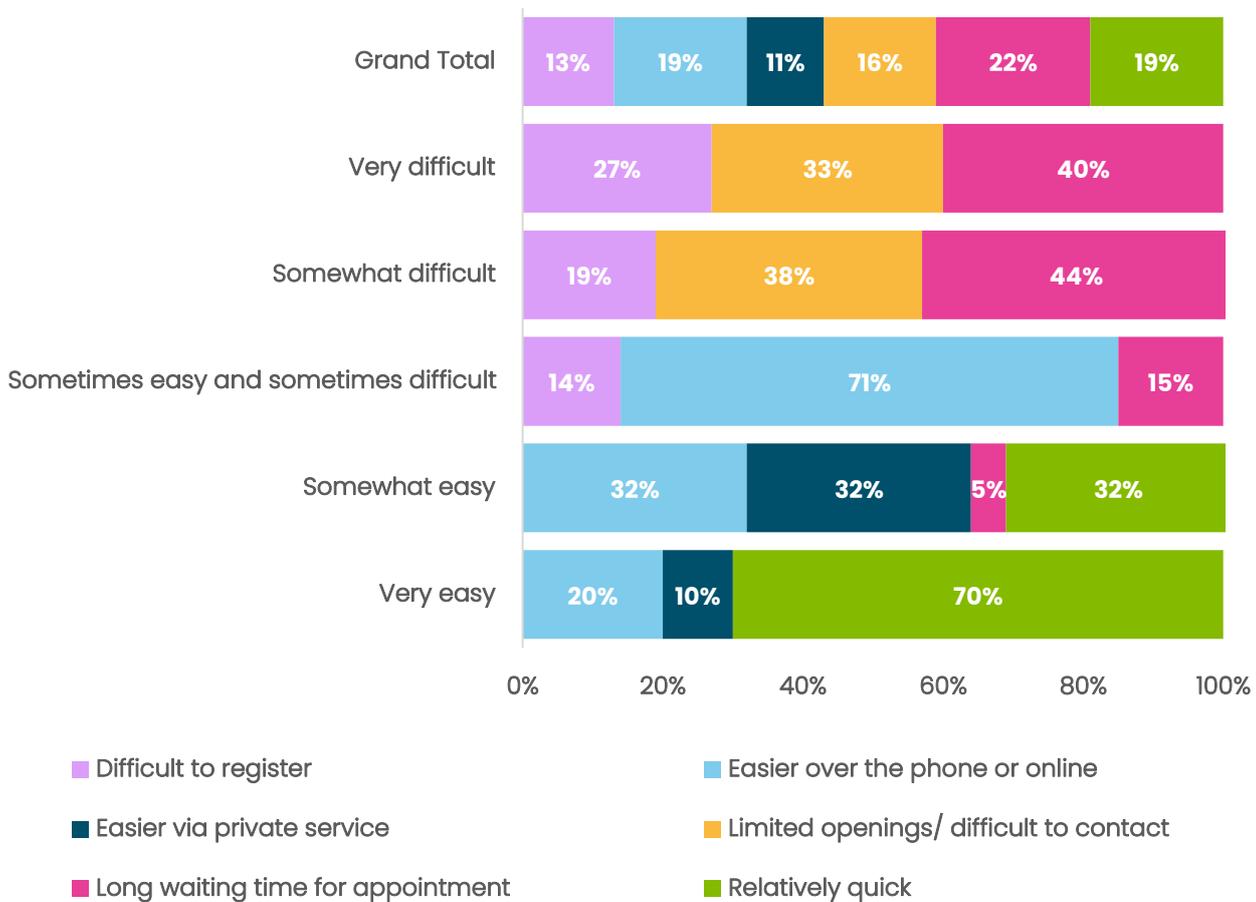
## Appointment and reasoning

The most common reason given for stating that it was very difficult to get an appointment was long waiting times (40%). For those who found it very easy to get an

appointment, they cited reasons such as the process being relatively quick (70%) or that it was easier over the phone or online.

- 11% of people said that their opinion was based on the fact they used a private service. All of these people found it somewhat easy or very easy to get an appointment.
- 13% of people said that it is difficult to register with a dentist at all and 16% mentioned that the dentist was difficult to contact.

### Reasoning for opinion about appointment

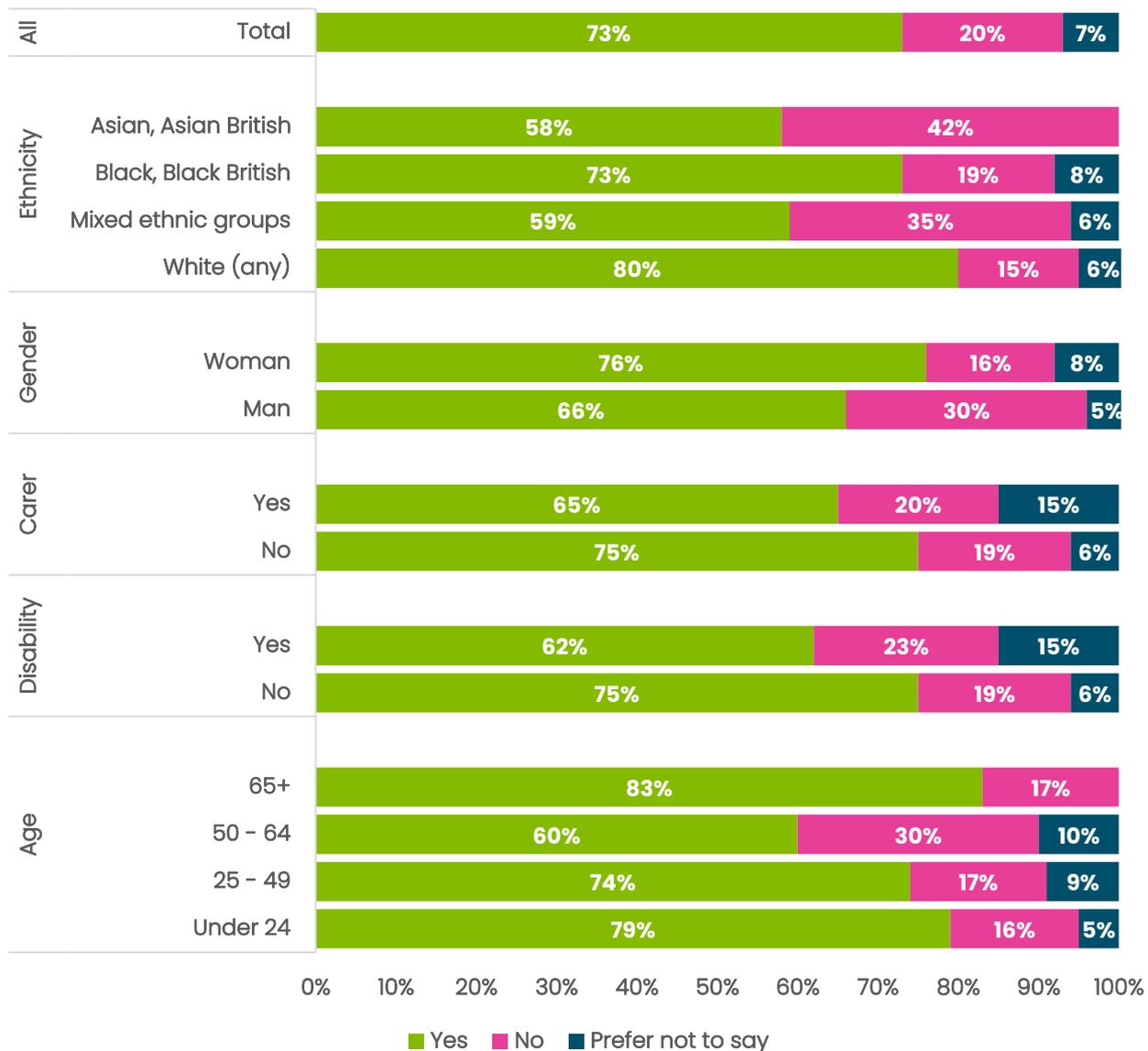


## Whether participants have seen a dentist in the past two years

Most people have seen a dentist in the past 2 years (73% overall). This is the case in almost all demographic groups but with some variations.

- Only 60% of 50–64-year-olds did. This is the lowest percentage out of all demographic groups.
- Women were more likely to have seen a dentist than men (76% vs 66%) and white and black respondents were more likely to than Asian and mixed ethnicity respondents (80%, 73% vs 58%, 59%).

### Have you seen a dentist in the last 2 years?

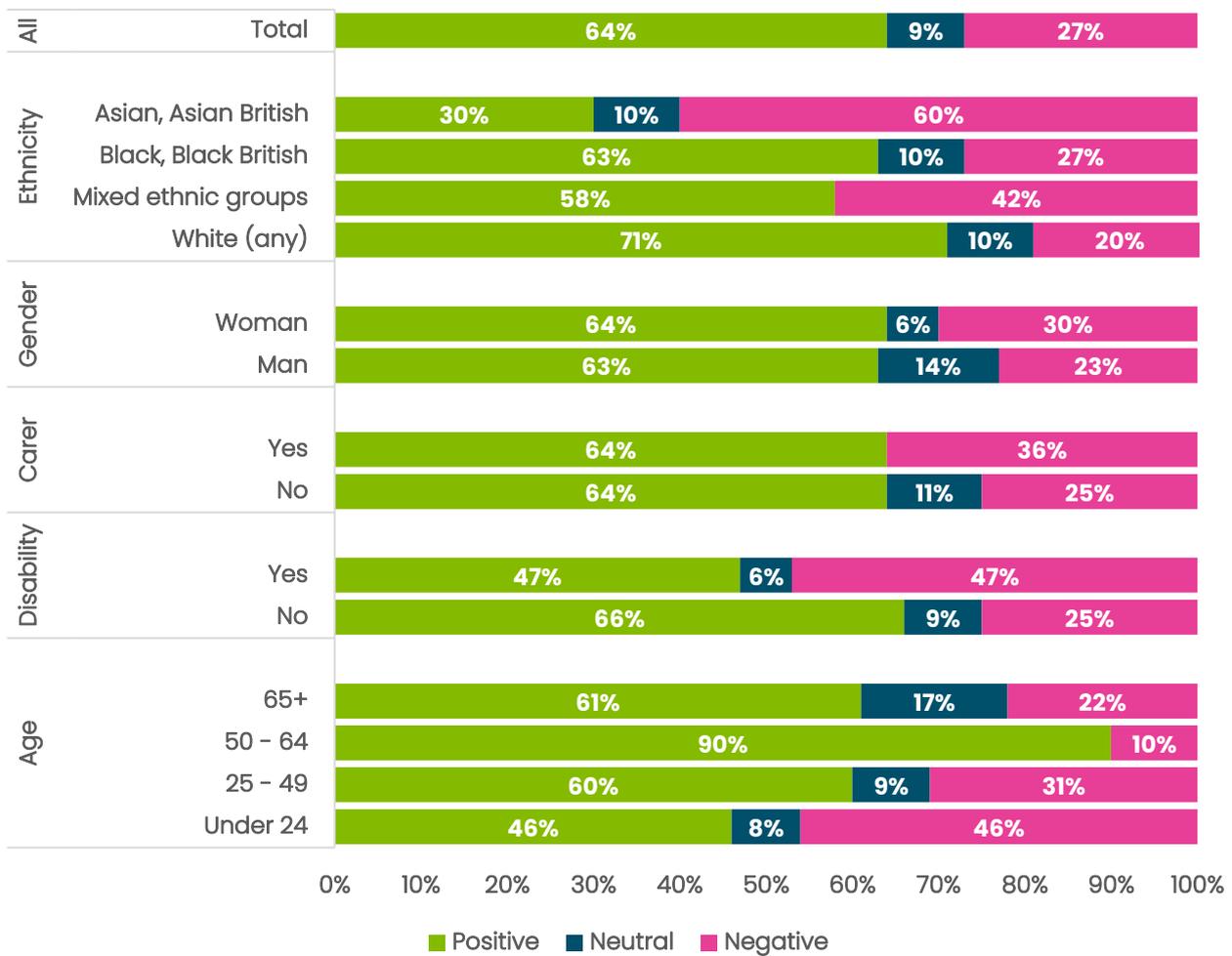


## Sentiment

Sentiment is positive, which is consistent amongst most demographic groups. Difference in sentiment is based on the age, disability status and ethnicity. Our survey found:

- Younger people under 24 indicate a less positive sentiment towards their dental surgery. Older people tend to have a more positive sentiment, reaching a peak of 90% for 50–64-year-olds.
- There is a 41 percentage point gap in positive sentiment between white and Asian respondents. White and black respondents seem to have a more positive sentiment overall compared to Asian and mixed ethnicity respondents.

### Sentiment

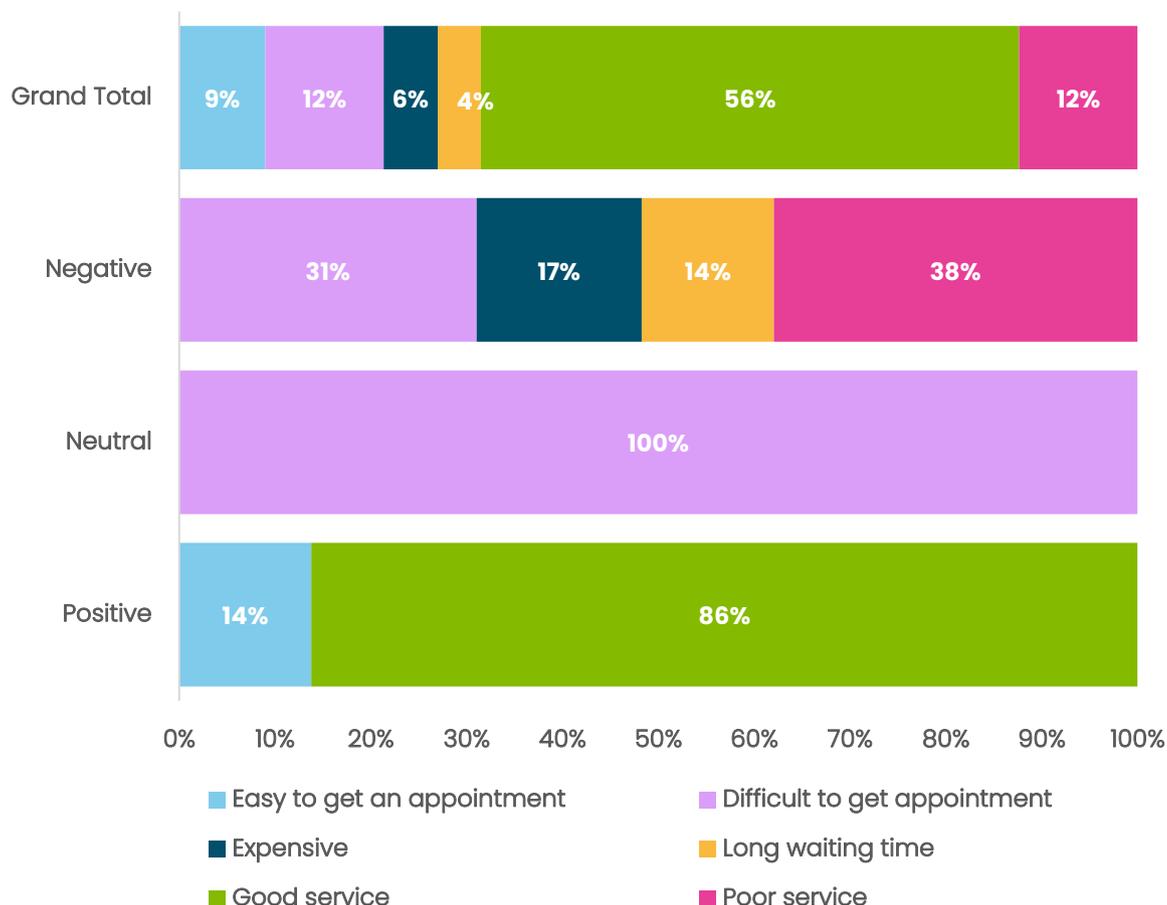


## Reasoning for sentiment

The quality of the service seems to play an important role in people’s sentiment as well as the difficulty of getting an appointment.

- For those who had a negative sentiment, 38% said it was due to poor service, while 31% said it was due to the difficulty of getting an appointment.
- Similarly, 86% of those who had a positive sentiment stated that this was due to a good service and the remaining 14% said it was easy to get an appointment.

### Reasoning for sentiment



### Conclusion

The majority of people in almost every demographic group hold a positive sentiment towards their dental surgery and find it easy or very easy to get an appointment. Age and ethnicity seemed to be the main source of variation, with younger or Asian/mixed ethnicity respondents finding it more difficult to get an appointment and having a less positive sentiment towards their dental surgery.

The primary issue overall was long waiting times, which seems to be a wider problem in access to NHS dentistry services across the UK<sup>4</sup>. For respondents who found it difficult to

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/bold-action-or-slow-decay-the-state-of-nhs-dentistry-and-future-policy-actions>

get an appointment, most mentioned long waiting times. Despite this, some respondents seemed to be able to find success getting an appointment by utilising digital tools or ringing round, while others mentioned success using a private service. Overall, we found considerable variation in people's experiences.

The importance of good service should also be recognised as this was the most important factor influencing people's overall sentiment. This suggests that, even in the context of long waiting times, the quality of the service can play an important role in improving people's perceptions of their dental surgery.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a proportion of Greenwich residents found it difficult to register or even contact their dental surgery at all. This represents a significant accessibility issue as people who are trying to access a vital healthcare service are unable to so.

## Provider Response:

### Response from South East London LDC

The South East London LDC is the representative body for dentists providing NHS primary care services in south east London. The LDC welcomes Healthwatch Greenwich's interest in dental services and the opportunity to respond to the findings of the survey.

The LDC is working with the South East London Integrated Care Board to improve dental services in the area and welcomes the evidence provided by Healthwatch Greenwich. As the report notes the sample is small and not necessarily indicative of wider trends of access and experience of care.

On the positive side of the report, it is heartening to see that the majority of patients who do access NHS dental services are happy with the service they receive. This reflects wider national trends where experiences of NHS dental services is generally very high. We do note the disparity in age and ethnicity however and would welcome the opportunity to work with Healthwatch Greenwich to understand more about this.

Access to services is a problem. We would draw a distinction, however, between those who are unable to access a service and those who cannot access a service in a timeframe they wish. Services can become particularly busy during school holidays as this is a popular time to access care. If patients require urgent care, there is the dedicated NHS 111 dental triage service and urgent dental care hubs where patients will be referred to.

In terms of access more generally, services are still recovering from the effects of the pandemic. In March 2020 access was at its usual level of around 111,112 (50.8 per cent of the adult population) adult patients accessing care within two years, but fell to a low of 78,675 (35.8 per cent of the adult population) by March 2022. Children's access suffered the same drop from 40,386 (58.5 per cent of the child population) in March 2020 to 14,581 (21 per cent of the child population) in March 2021. By March 2022, however, children's access had doubled to over 30,000 showing the profession responding to concerns around children's oral health and access to dental care. The data shows that even prior to the pandemic commissioned capacity would only support 59 per cent of children in the borough and 51 per cent of adults, automatically leaving some people unable to access dental care.

The NHS commissions a set amount of activity from dental practices. Access rates in 2022 varied by ward from 40.7 per cent of all residents in Eltham West accessing care within the maximum NICE recall guidelines to 27.7 per cent of all residents in Greenwich West accessing NHS care within the maximum NICE recall guidelines.

A note on terminology: The report references "registration" with a dental practice. While this term is frequently used by both patients and practitioners it is no longer correct. Since 2006 when the current dental contract was introduced there has been no registration of patients at NHS dental practices. While we understand that it is a convenient term it is also unhelpful and should be avoided, as per Healthwatch England's own advice. Without registration patients access care wherever possible meaning that patients may have to travel further than their closest practice and indeed outside of the borough to access care.

**LDC Recommendations:**

- Healthwatch Greenwich to contact the LDC before embarking on further investigations into dentistry to ensure that terminology is current and practices are engaged.
- Healthwatch Greenwich to work with the LDC in highlighting access issues to the South East London Integrated Care Board and local care partnership in Greenwich.
- The LDC would be happy to work with Healthwatch Greenwich on some local patient facing information about dental services in the borough.

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