

**January 2022 – Stakeholder Update No.5**

**COVID-19: Resumption of dental services**

This bulletin aims to keep you up to date with the current situation regarding the resumption of dental services across our region which, like everywhere in the country, have been severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

The dental sector has faced particular challenges since March 2020, due to the proximity between a dental professional and a patient’s airway and the relatively high proportion of aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) undertaken. Because of the use of a high speed drill and the high risk of transmission via AGPs, dental services were not permitted to see patients for face to face care at the start of the pandemic and when services resumed were unable, and are still unable, to see the number of patients during a clinical session that they could before the pandemic due to the need to comply with strict infection control guidance for the safety of patients and staff. This has led to a backlog of unmet need, delayed and suspended treatments.

Whilst all NHS dental practices are open and able to safely provide a full range of treatments, the reduced capacity across the dental sector means that they have been asked to continue to follow the advice of the Chief Dental Officer, which is to prioritise patients according to their clinical need.

Practices were required to meet a set of conditions in return for income protection, which has included a progression towards full contract delivery, with effect from January 2022, the expectation is that they will meet a minimum of 85% of their total contract.

Practices have been asked to continue to prioritise patients with the greatest need into their available NHS treatment capacity. Those requiring urgent dental care and vulnerable patients are prioritised, which likely means a delay for patients seeking an appointment for non-urgent treatment. NHS England continues to support dental providers across the region to resume regular NHS dental services safely and effectively and in accordance with the advice set out by the Chief Dental Officer.

Across Yorkshire and the Humber there are some localities where patients have had historical and continuing problems accessing NHS dentistry and plans were being developed to increase capacity and look at alternative ways of providing care in these areas. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily delayed progressing with this. Once the NHS emerges safely from the on-going Covid-19 pandemic our intention is to continue with this work to improve general access and reduce inequalities, where possible.

It is important to remember that unlike general medical services patients do not ‘register’ with a dentist and it is not a requirement for a patient to be on a specific practice’s list to access NHS dental care.

Many NHS dental practices also offer private appointments which, as independent contractors, they are at liberty to do.  Mixed practices, offering both NHS and private treatment, tend to have separate appointment books for both NHS and private treatment, with staff teams often employed to provide these different arrangements.  NHS provision must be available across the practice’s contracted opening hours and demand for NHS treatment is such that they could have used up their available NHS appointments and practices may, therefore, offer private appointments to patients*.*

At this time, we are asking patients for their understanding and co-operation during this unprecedented and difficult period of time for the NHS.

**The advice to patients is:**

* If your teeth and gums are healthy – a check-up, or scale and polish may not be needed for up to 24 months
* When you come into the surgery for an appointment, please remember that social distancing remains in place and you will still need to wear a face mask upon entering the practice.
* The infection control process for dentistry has not changed with the lifting of COVID19 restrictions – masks and hand hygiene measures are still required.
* It’s important that dental practices continue to follow this guidance as they are a healthcare setting and they are doing all they can to ensure your safety when you come to the practice.
* Every dental practice is working extremely hard to provide care to patients within the restrictions and guidance – please be respectful at all times.
* All NHS dental practices are following the guidance, and private dental practices are recommended to follow them by the health regulator, the Care Quality Commission.
* Similar public health measures are still in place for hospitals and GP practices too. Advice is that the infection prevention control measures in dentistry should continue to be followed until further notice
* Dental practices will continue to have restrictions on leaving time between patients to ventilate rooms – this has an impact on how many patients they are able to see each day.
* All dental practices are prioritising patients for treatment based on urgency and priority groups, such as those more at risk of dental disease or children.

**Our previous messages to patients are also still in place:**

* Please only visit a dental practice if you have an appointment and telephone to book an appointment only if essential – dentists are currently prioritising the vulnerable or those with the most urgent need.
* Appointments for some routine treatments, such as dental check-ups, may be delayed.
* Dental practices may look a little different than they used to as they will be operating in a way that observes COVID-19 social distancing and hygiene rules to ensure everyone’s safety.
* If you develop an urgent dental issue telephone your regular dental practice (or any NHS practice if you don’t have a regular dentist) for advice on what to do next.
* Dental issues will be triaged over the telephone, initially. If the dentist thinks that you need face to face care, you will be given an appointment at the practice and advised to attend as long as you do not have any COVID-19 symptoms.
* Anyone clinically triaged as requiring treatment will be given clear instructions by the practice on what they need to do prior to their appointment and once they get to the practice.
* If after a telephone triage the clinician decides the issue is not urgent, you may be given advice on how to self-manage the dental problem. You will be advised to make contact again if your situation changes/worsens
* If you would like to be able to make an appointment for routine dental care but the practice advises it is not possible to do so, please be understanding of the current situation with regards to the prioritisation of those with urgent needs and be respectful of the clinical decisions taken by the practices.

*For out of hours care:*

* Toothache should initially be managed with over the counter pain relief until an appointment can be made with your general dental practice. A pharmacist can advise you what is the best pain control to meet your needs.
* Lost fillings, crowns or bridges, broken teeth or braces are not usually deemed to be clinically urgent and patients are advised to contact their local dental practice when they re-open.
* Only ring NHS 111 out of hours when your dental needs cannot be met by self-care and cannot wait until your regular practice – if you have one - is open to contact them for advice.

**Communicating with the public**

Please find below a number of tweets/Facebook messages and a digital asset that you may share on your own social media accounts etc.

* **Tweet:** Dental practices are safe and open for face to face care, but it is not ‘business as usual’.
* **Tweet:** You will still be required to wear a face mask when you visit a dental practice and follow strict hand hygiene. Please be respectful of the guidance and dental teams at all times.
* **Tweet:** The dentist is best placed to clinically assess dental issues. If your dental issue is deemed non-urgent, we would ask that you don’t then call 111 for a second opinion leaving 111 staff free to deal with other patients with urgent health issues.
* **Tweet:** Please be aware that dentists are currently still prioritising vulnerable patients or those with urgent dental needs; it is therefore unlikely that routine dental care such as dental check-ups will be available at this time. #helpushelpyou
* **Tweet:** Please note that appointments for some routine dental treatments, such as dental check-ups, are limited at this time as dentists prioritise vulnerable patients and those with urgent dental needs. #helpushelpyou
* **Tweet**: Only ring NHS111 out of hours should you require urgent dental care – please note that lost fillings, crowns or bridges, broken teeth or braces are not deemed to be clinically urgent and patients are advised to contact their local dental practice when they re-open.
* **Tweet:** Toothache should initially be managed with over the counter pain relief until an appointment can be made with your general dental practice – if you don’t have a regular dentist call your nearest NHS dental practice. #helpushelpyou

**Digital Asset**

