

Update from the Region – NHS NEL Primary Care Team

Primary dental care practices are currently working at 95% of their pre-pandemic activity and this unfortunately means that access to services is reduced. Practices are working extremely hard to deal with urgent and outstanding courses of treatment and, while some are in position to offer routine appointments within a reasonable timeframe, this is not uniform across London and therefore it is quite possible that if a patient wishes to be seen sooner, private treatment may be offered outside of normal working hours as an alternative. The pandemic has undoubtedly affected the recruitment of dentists and there have been a total of seven terminations of existing contracts, where providers have simply surrendered their contract on the basis that they do not have the required workforce to fulfil it.

Patients who need to see a dentist for urgent care (for example those in pain or with facial swelling) in London can use the NHS 111 service that diverts patients to the dental triage service. These services are in operation 24/7 for patients who do not routinely attend a practice and have an urgent need and are unable to find a local practice which has capacity. If the triage service assesses that the issue is urgent, an appointment at an urgent dental care centre will be arranged. The UDCH will continue to provide these services in line with the road map.

NHS England (London) has devised a 'roadmap' for the recovery of dental services (attached), which is already in operation. We are also looking at need, current capacity and utilising any additional funding to support additional access. As an example of this, during February £50million was made available nationally for the remainder of 2021/22 to fund initiatives to increase access for patients. In London, more than 200 practices signed up to deliver these services through to the end of March including practices in NEL. The uptake in the capital was extremely encouraging, with practices coming forward to provide both weekend and evening clinics, with an emphasis on stabilising patients dental needs rather than just providing urgent care. As a result, an additional 30,000 appointments were provided utilising this additional investment.

We intend to invest additional resources during 2022/23, with an emphasis on stabilisation to ensure the dental health of patients is maintained; this investment will include the procurement of new dental practices or additional resource in areas of the highest need with existing contracts and capacity to provide new additional access, utilising resources freed up by practices that surrendered their NHS contracts and thus ensuring that these resources are re-invested in dental services across London. The following boroughs will have some additional funds invested in NEL, Tower Hamlets and Redbridge following a needs assessment that was carried out to identify the areas of need across London (also Haringey but not NEL).