



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From Maria Caulfield MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Primary Care and Patient Safety*

*39 Victoria Street
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Your Ref: ZA11225

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Catherine West MP

By email to: catherine.west.mp@parliament.uk

16 November 2021

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your correspondence of 12 July to Sajid Javid on behalf of a number of your constituents about access to NHS dental services. Please accept my sincere apologies for the delay in replying.

I was sorry to read of your constituents' difficulties accessing services.

First, I would like to reassure your constituents that patients are free to attend any dental practice that holds a contract to deliver NHS care and is taking on new patients. There are no geographical restrictions on which practice a patient may attend, although dental practices will not always have the capacity to take on new NHS patients.

Where a practice is not currently taking on new NHS patients, the patient is not forced to accept private treatment from that practice. Instead, they have the choice to seek NHS care from an alternative practice.

Practices that are not currently taking on new patients may keep lists of those who want to receive NHS care. It would be a matter for the patient as to whether they want to join such a list.

NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE&I) controls the size of contracts held by orthodontists. As there are a high number of patients requiring treatment that is dependent on funding, there is a waiting list.

In addition, COVID-19 has impacted the level of appointments that can be safely provided by orthodontists. Dental practices have been sent information to distribute to the patients they have referred on for orthodontic assessments. NHS orthodontists' providers have been asked to maximise safe throughput to meet as many prioritised needs as possible. This has been underpinned by an activity threshold for full payment of contractual value that was increased to 80 per cent of pre-pandemic orthodontic activity levels for care delivered between April and September 2021. This was in order to facilitate access for a greater number of patients, whilst also accounting for the impact of ongoing requirements for infection prevention and control.

A list of all specialist orthodontists registered in the UK can be found on the General Dental Council website at <https://olr.gdc-uk.org/searchregister>.

There are significant practical, financial and timing challenges in improving ventilation in an estimated 20,000 dental practice rooms across England. However, we have been exploring a range of interventions that could result in increased NHS oral healthcare capacity, including pre-appointment testing.

We recognise there is more we can do to improve dental services and ensure that patients are able to access the care they need. The Chief Dental Officer and NHS England are also looking closely at how NHS activity can support our wider work to tackle health inequalities by focusing activity on those in greatest need of treatment.

We are taking steps to improve the recruitment and retention of dentists by:

- improving career pathways through Health Education England's (HEE's) Advancing Dental Care programme;
- reforming the current dental contract to make the NHS more attractive for the dental profession; and
- using NHS England's flexible commissioning framework, which is allowing for a greater use of the skill mix of all disciplines within the dental team, with the aim of creating a capable and motivated multidisciplinary workforce.

We will continue to work with HEE to ensure we have the data to support future workforce planning and address shortages of dental professionals in some areas and clinical specialties, through local sustainability transformation partnerships and integrated care systems.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Maria'.

MARIA CAULFIELD