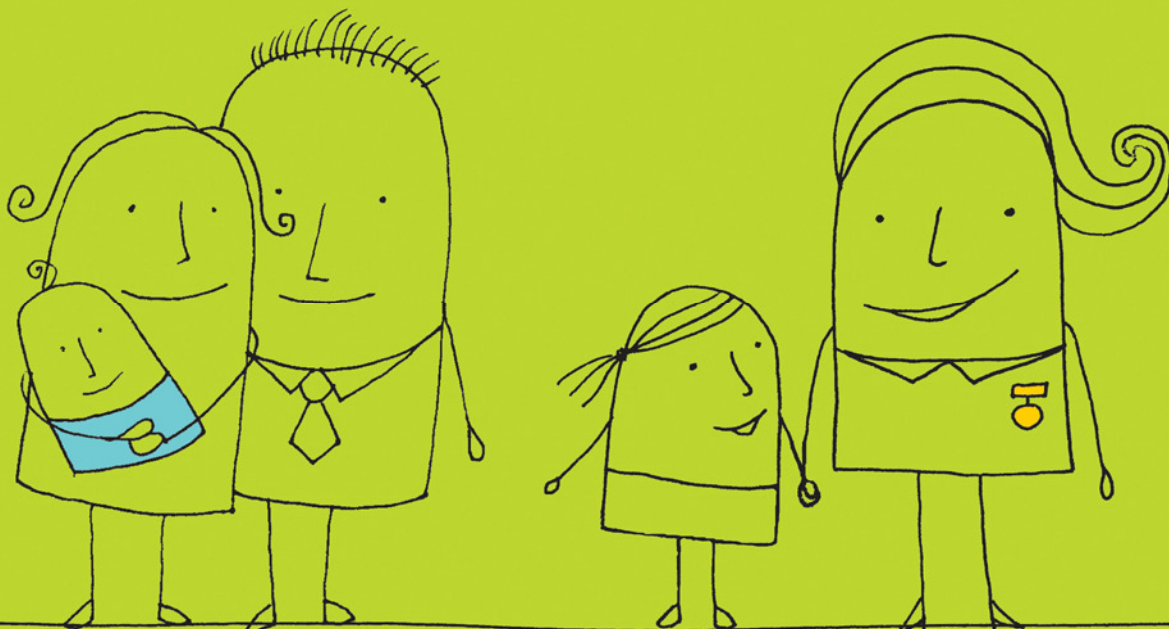


Patient and Client Council

# A Survey of Dental Practices Regarding Access to 'NHS Dentistry'

June 2009



**Your voice** in health and social care

This information is available in other formats

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The Patient and Client Council has been set up to provide a powerful independent voice for patients, service users, carers and communities on health and social care issues.

The main functions of the Patient and Client Council are to:

- Engage with the public to obtain their views on any part of health and social care
- To promote the involvement of patients, clients, carers and the public in the design, planning, commissioning and delivery of health and social care;
- To provide assistance to people making a complaint relating to health and social care;
- Provide advice and information to the public about health and social care services

Patient and Client Council local office staff, across Northern Ireland, were aware that many members of the public experience difficulties accessing what is known as 'NHS Dentistry'. This is evident in the number of contacts received by local offices on this issue. This is particularly true of the Southern and Western area.

During June this year the Minister for Health announced considerable additional investment in dentistry through a contract with Oasis Dental Care.

During July 2009 the Patient and Client Council officers carried out a survey of dental practices. The purpose of the survey was to gather evidence on public access to dental provision throughout Northern Ireland. The survey was designed to establish a baseline of access to High Street dental services prior to the implementation of additional investment by the Department.

Patient and Client Council officers wished to establish the current position for those seeking registration as an 'NHS' patient. The results will be used to maintain a watching brief on the development of services and to ascertain the impact on patient experiences of the anticipated improvement in dental services.

In addition Patient and Client Council staff took the opportunity to raise awareness of the role of the Council by issuing each Dental Practice in Northern Ireland with a supply of leaflets for their patients.

This report presents the results of the survey across the Health and Social Care areas:

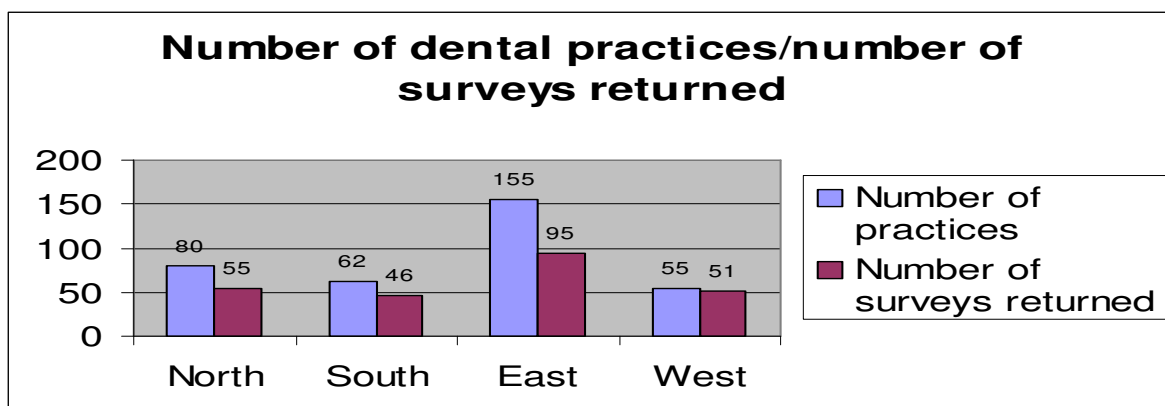
- Belfast and South Eastern area
- Northern area
- Southern area
- Western area

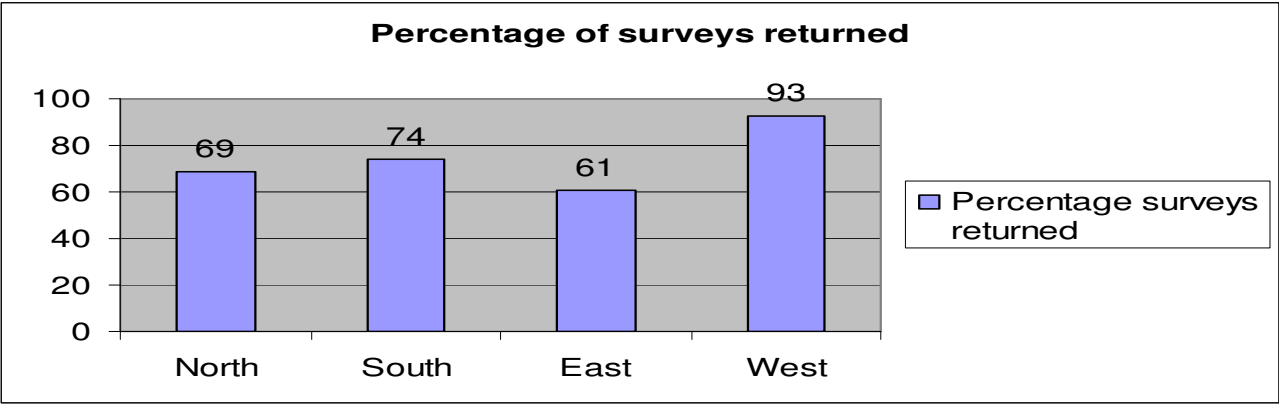
## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was devised and posted to all dental practices in Northern Ireland from the PCC central office in Belfast – responses were returned to central office. The aim of the questionnaire was to capture capacity within each practice by identifying how many ‘chairs’ or equipped/staffed surgeries are in place. Access to services was captured through questions on waiting times and registration criteria. Qualitative information from principal dentists on their relationships with HSC/NHS was also collected.

The responses were divided up into the areas covered by the Local offices. Staff in the Local offices were then asked to follow up by phone to the practices in their area which had not returned the survey.

The response rate was 70%. Details of responses for each health and social care area are shown below. It should be noted that for the purpose of this exercise the South Eastern area was combined with the Belfast area.





### **3.0 BELFAST AND SOUTH EASTERN AREA**

The Belfast and South Eastern Area covered the following Borough/District Councils:

Ards  
Belfast City  
Castlereagh  
Down  
Lisburn  
North Down

## Overview of dental responses in the Belfast and South Eastern Area

### Background

There were 155 practices in the Eastern Area. The breakdown for the six District/Borough Council areas is as follows:

### Synopsis of Survey Findings

Responses to the questionnaire were received from 95 practices making the response rate 61%. A breakdown of the practices that returned information is below.

<b>District Council</b>	<b>No of dental practices</b>	<b>No of dental practices which returned survey</b>	<b>No of 'chairs'</b>
Ards Borough Council	11	5	9
Belfast City Council	82	56	102
Castlereagh Borough Council	11	5	11
Down District Council	11	8	16
Lisburn District Council	20	13	20
North Down District Council	20	8	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>185</b>

Across the Belfast and South Eastern Area, the responses revealed patchy access to services for NHS patients. See Summary of Dental Practices in the Belfast and Eastern Area on page 10. The results suggest that:

- a) 48% (46) of practices reported that they were registering adult NHS patients.



- b) 81% (77) confirmed that they were registering NHS patients under 18 years old.
- c) 10% (10) maintain a waiting list for registration.
- d) 33% (31) set criteria for NHS registration such as:
- family members/children of patients already registered
  - patients on benefits/exempt
  - children whose parents are registered with the practice on the private plan
- e) 29 practices had a practice list with less than 60% NHS registrations.
- f) 0 practices had between 60-75% NHS registrations.
- g) 55 practices had over 75% NHS registrations on their list.

Barriers to registering more NHS patients were cited as:

<b>Barriers commented upon</b>	<b>Occurrence in comments</b>
Workload/Staffing	25 practices
Remuneration	12 practices
Waiting times for patients	8 practices
Inability to recruit additional dentists	5 practices
Patients not attending or fully co-operating with care	2 practices.

Specimen comments are set out below:

‘Our practice is not well advertised and some people don’t even know there is a dental practice here. ’

‘Hassle and bureaucracy’ – as a barrier to NHS work.

‘Mainly private practice – see children and exempt adults as goodwill. No interest in seeing more NHS patients. Not worthwhile.’

‘Impossible to do a high standard of treatment for the fees. New legislations on sterilisation increase overheads and time between patients.’

‘Strictly private – no NHS registrations.’

‘High demand for Polish dentist. No space for any other patients.’

‘Very busy.’

‘Increasing legislations – fee doesn’t cover what you pay.’

‘This is a new dental practice that is keen to grow and provide NHS dental treatment with the potential to add another 2 dentists if the demand is there.’

‘,,, Patients expect treatment and emergency care which should only be expected with private care.’

‘Actively seeking new NHS patients ...’

‘Patient numbers at capacity for the hours worked by the dentists.’

‘Need another dentist!’

‘One dentist and a lot of patients.’

## **Conclusions**

- The vast majority of practices are based within the Belfast City Council area.
- Across the area, a number of practices are actively seeking to register new NHS patients.
- Many of the practices are small.
- Almost half of practices are registering adult NHS patients but one-third of practices apply criteria to registration.
- Access for under 18 year olds appears to be good with 81% of practices registering them as patients.

Belfast and South Eastern Area						
District Council Area	Total Number of Practices	Total Number of Practices which responded	Number of dentist chairs in each District Council area	Number of Practices registering NHS Adult Patients	Number of Practices registering 0-18yrs NHS patients	
Ards Borough Council	11	5	9	2	5	
Belfast City Council	82	56	102	27	43	
Castlereagh Borough Council	11	5	11	4	5	
Down District Council	11	8	16	6	7	
North Down District Council	20	13	27	4	10	
Lisburn District Council	20	8	20	3	7	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>77</b>	
District Council Area	Number of Practices holding a waiting list for registration	Number of practices setting criteria for NHS registration	Number of Practices offering any specialist service to patients with special or particular needs	% of NHS registered patients in Practices		
				75-100%	60-75%	<60%
Ards Borough Council	0	1	1	1	0	4
Belfast City Council	7	19	13	33	0	15
Castlereagh Borough Council	1	1	0	4	0	1
Down District Council	0	1	3	8	0	0
North Down District Council	2	8	4	5	0	6
Lisburn District Council	0	1	4	4	0	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>29</b>

## **4.0 Northern Area**

The Northern Area covers the following Borough/District Councils:

Antrim  
Ballymena  
Ballymoney  
Carrickfergus  
Coleraine  
Cookstown  
Larne  
Magherafelt  
Moyle  
Newtownabbey

## Overview of dental responses in the Northern Area

### Background

There are a total of 80 practices in the Northern Area. The breakdown for the ten District/Borough Council areas is as follows:

### Synopsis of Survey Findings

Responses to the questionnaire were received from 55 practices making the response rate 69%. A breakdown of the practices that returned information is below.

<b>District/Borough Council</b>	<b>No of dental practices</b>	<b>No of dental practices which returned survey</b>	<b>No of 'chairs'</b>
Antrim Borough Council	7	4	13
Ballymena Borough Council	14	12	32
Ballymoney Borough Council	5	3	7
Carrickfergus Borough Council	8	4	7
Coleraine Borough Council	13	11	24
Cookstown District Council	5	3	7
Larne Borough Council	6	2	4
Magherafelt District Council	7	4	11
Moyle District Council	3	3	5
Newtownabbey Borough Council	12	9	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>136</b>

Across the Northern Area, the responses showed a mixed picture for patients, see Summary of Dental Practices in the Northern Area on page 19. The results suggest that:-

- a) 61% (34) of practices reported that they are registering adult NHS patients
- b) 90% (50) are registering 0-18 NHS patients.
- c) Almost half of the practices (22) set criteria for NHS registration such as:
  - Only patients receiving benefits entitling free dental treatment
  - Family member already registered at practice
  - Parents already registered at practice
  - Adults whose registration has not expired
- d) 12% (7) maintain a waiting list for registration
- e) 14 practices had a practice list with less than 60% NHS registrations
- f) 1 practice had between 60-75% NHS registrations
- g) 39 practices had over 75% NHS registrations on their list.

Barriers to registering more NHS patients were cited as:

<b>Barriers commented upon</b>	<b>Occurrence of comments</b>
Bureaucracy/Workload/Staffing	27 practices
Remuneration	12 practices
Waiting times for patients	4 practices
Inability to recruit additional dentists	3 practices
Patients not attending or fully co-operating with care	0 practices

Some specimen comments are set out below:

‘Workload, staffing, adequate remuneration, red tape for recent decontaminations advice eg environmental storage.’

‘Excessive numbers already registered. No advantage in having large registration as this means more patients demanding urgent treatment with less time available to complete treatments therefore less revenue etc. Make it financially more rewarding to register more patients (like doctors!) and you will see registrations shoot up.’

‘NHS fees do not equip a surgery and upkeep it while paying a nurse and dentist, and I have 2 free rooms. Government policy - spend millions bringing in external providers rather than spend a few pound on existing practices. Dentists can only sustain the NHS by doing vast quantities of work resulting in burn out at a young age... New infection control measures will result in slower throughput of patients.’

‘Too busy, too heavy a workload, long waiting times between appointments. Waiting room too small.’

‘In the past, a large percentage of NHS registrations prevented me from investing adequately in the practice. Also, non-NHS patients have access to a wider range of dental treatments - NHS regulations prevent us from carrying out many types of treatment. Postgraduate courses teach techniques which can't be carried out on the NHS.’

‘We have probably approx 7000 patients in our files although not all registered, they will turn up sometime and still think they are registered with us. Therefore the waiting times for appointments can be 3-4 months which is not satisfactory for dentist or patient. If we see new

patients, and there is a demand, then our own patients are neglected e.g. emergency slots at lunch time. All 3 surgeries work flat out here, there are no half days so there is no space to increase capacity. We have a trainee who is a little slower, this is because we cannot attract associates to this area who could probably see more patients. However we are working on this.'

'Fee per item of service too low and some items are almost impossible to sustain because of level of remuneration.'

'Lack of Associates willing to work outside of Belfast.'

## **Conclusions**

- 61% of practices indicated a willingness to register adult NHS patients and 90% 0-18 NHS patients. On the surface this looks promising; however almost half of the practices set criteria for registration. This may leave a significant number of people who may wish to register as new patients under the NHS unable to get registered.
- Some practices said they had the potential to expand but could not do so for financial reasons and/or inability to recruit dentists.



Moyle District Council	N/A	0	0	3	0	0
Newtownabbey Borough Council	1	<b>Northern Area</b>		7	0	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>Number 16</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>
District Council Area	Total Number of Practices	Total Number of Practices which responded	dentist chairs in each District Council area	Number of Practices registering NHS Adult Patients	Number of Practices registering 0-18yrs NHS patients	
Antrim Borough Council	7	4	13	4	4	
Ballymena Borough Council	14	12	32	6	11	
Ballymoney Borough Council	5	3	7	3	3	
Carrickfergus Borough Council	8	4	7	0	3	
Coleraine Borough Council	13	11	24	5	8	
Cookstown District Council	5	3	7	1	3	
Larne Borough Council	6	2	4	1	2	
Magherafelt District Council	7	4	11	3	4	
Moyle District Council	3	3	5	3	3	
Newtownabbey Borough Council	12	9	26	8	9	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>50</b>	
District Council Area	Number of Practices holding a waiting list for registration	Number of practices setting criteria for NHS registration	Number of Practices offering any specialist service to patients with special or particular needs	% of NHS registered patients in Practices		
				75-100%	60-75%	<60%
Antrim Borough Council	N/A	1	0	3	0	1
Ballymena Borough Council	2	5	2	10	0	2
Ballymoney Borough Council	N/A	0	1	3	0	0
Carrickfergus Borough Council	0	2	1	0	0	3
Coleraine Borough Council	3	3	3	11	0	0
Cookstown District Council	1	3	1	0	1	2
Larne Borough Council	0	2	1	0	0	1
Magherafelt District Council	0	2	4	2	0	3

## **5.0 Southern Area**

The Southern Area covers the following Borough/District Councils:

Armagh  
Banbridge  
Craigavon  
Dungannon  
Newry & Mourne

## Overview of dental responses in the Southern Area

### Background

There are 62 practices in the Southern Area. The breakdown for the five District Council areas is as follows:

### Synopsis of Survey Findings

Responses to the questionnaire were received from 46 practices making the response rate 74%. A breakdown of the practices that returned information is below.

<b>District Council</b>	<b>No of dental practices</b>	<b>No of dental practices which returned survey</b>	<b>No of 'chairs'</b>
Armagh	10	8	25
Banbridge	10	10	18
Craigavon	13	7	24
Dungannon	11	8	22
Newry & Mourne	18	13	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>130</b>

Across the Southern Area, the responses showed a mixed picture for patients. See Summary of Dental Practices in the Southern Area on page 25. The results suggest that:-

- a) 54% (25) of practices reported that they were registering adult NHS patients.
- b) 91% (42) confirmed that they were registering NHS patients under 18 years old.
- c) 6% (3) maintain a waiting list for registration.
- d) 41% (19) set criteria for NHS registration such as:-
  - children of families who are registered

- relatives of current patients
  - attended in last 5 years
  - attended since 2003 etc
  - children will be seen privately if parents' registration has lapsed
  - people who are exempt from fees (under 18, full-time education, over 65,)
- e) 18 practices had a practice list with less than 60% NHS registrations.
- f) 3 practices had between 60-75% NHS registrations.
- g) 19 practices had over 75% NHS registrations on their list.

Barriers to registering more NHS patients were cited as:

<b>Barriers commented upon</b>	<b>Occurrence of comments</b>
Workload/Staffing	7 practices
Remuneration	14 practices
Waiting times for patients	2 practices
Inability to recruit additional dentists	3
Patients not attending or fully co-operating with care	2

Specimen comments are set out below:

‘Too often, people do not attend or waste surgery time and therefore it is not possible to continue to waste practice time on such patients.’

‘No capacity – practice booked 3 months in advance.’

‘Too busy at present, and not enough funding available to expand premises or staff.’

‘Cannot get associate dentists.’

'Have substantially increased NHS registration from taking on an extra dentist.'

'... choose not to see NHS patients.'

'Inadequate system of remuneration.'

'..prefer patients to be private if they are having major work done, crowns, etc.'

'At present we are trying to phase out of NHS and into private sector.'

'Patient awareness of registration times and the need to re-register by physically signing a form.'

'Fees insufficient to cover treatment.'

## **Conclusions**

- Whilst over half of practices indicated a willingness to register NHS patients, almost half of those practices set criteria for registration. This may leave a substantial number of people unable to get registered.
- Practices are generally extremely busy.
- There is evidence that whilst practices may wish to expand they believe that this is not possible due to financial restraints, inability to recruit staff.
- There is a role for greater patient awareness and co-operation. Patients may be unaware of the need to re-register with dentists and thereby leave themselves without a dentist.

## Southern Area

District Council Area	Total Number of Practices	Total Number of Practices which responded	Number of dentist chairs in each District Council area	Number of Practices registering NHS Adult Patients	Number of Practices registering 0-18yrs NHS patients	
Armagh District Council	10	8	25	5	8	
Dungannon District Council	11	8	22	4	6	
Craigavon District Council	13	7	24	4	7	
Banbridge District Council	10	10	18	4	10	
Newry & Mourne District Council	18	13	41	8	11	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>42</b>	
District Council Area	Number of Practices holding a waiting list for registration	Number of practices setting criteria for NHS registration	Number of Practices offering any specialist service to patients with special or particular needs	% of NHS registered patients in Practices		
				75-100%	60-75%	<60%
Armagh District Council	0	3	2	6	0	2
Dungannon District Council	2	6	3	2	0	3
Craigavon District Council	0	2	5	5	1	0
Banbridge District Council	0	2	5	0	2	8
Newry & Mourne District Council	1	6	5	6	0	5
<b>Totals</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>18</b>

## **6.0 Western Area**

The Western Area covers the following Borough/District Councils:

Derry  
Fermanagh  
Limavady  
Omagh  
Strabane

## Overview of dental responses in the Western Area

### Background

There are a total of 55 practices in the Western Area. The breakdown for the five District/Borough Council areas is as follows:

### Synopsis of Survey Findings

Responses to the questionnaire were received from 51 practices making the response rate 93%. A breakdown of the practices that returned information is below.

<b>District/Borough Council</b>	<b>No of dental practices</b>	<b>No of dental practices which returned survey</b>	<b>No of 'chairs'</b>
Derry	18	16	41
Fermanagh	15	13	32
Limavady	5	5	13
Omagh	10	10	25
Strabane	7	7	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>127</b>



Across the Western Area, the responses showed a mixed picture for patients, see Summary of Dental Practices in the Western Area on page 31. The results suggest that:

a) 37% (19) of practices reported that they are registering adult NHS patients and 61% (40) are registering 0-18 NHS patients. However the majority (31) set criteria for NHS registration such as:

- Only patients who are completely exempt
- Parents already registered at practice
- Family members already registered at practice
- Patients previously registered with practice
- Only patients who live in the locality

b) 18% (9) maintain a waiting list for registration.

c) 25 practices had a practice list with less than 60% NHS registrations.

d) 5 practices had between 60-75% NHS registrations.

e) 19 practices had over 75% NHS registrations on their list.

Barriers to registering more NHS patients were cited as:

<b>Barriers commented upon</b>	<b>Occurrence of comments</b>
Bureaucracy/Workload/Staffing	21 practices
Remuneration	14 practices
Waiting times for patients	1 practice
Inability to recruit additional dentists	3 practices
Patients not attending or fully co-operating with care	0 practices

Some specimen comments are set out below:

‘Time Constraints, Bureaucracy and funding.’

‘Funding. Confidence in long term Government commitment to NHS Register. Public apathy to dental care matters. Bureaucratic workload without assistance from other bodies.’

‘Cannot find an associate. NHS paperwork would require more staff for admin purposes. Private treatment is a lot easier from this point of view.’

‘Have not registered new patients (aside from a few immediate family members) for 3 years and my waiting time for an appointment is still 8 weeks due to poor dental health in this area.’

‘Availability of Dentists. I could register many more NHS patients if I could recruit more dentists, I have a spare unused surgery.’

‘We are limited severely by the fact that this practice is the only one in the area registering NHS patients. We have had to suspend registrations several times to try and work through our backlog.’

‘NHS payments/remuneration far to low, unable to operate business at such low fees. Actively removing NHS from list unless fees dramatically increase.’

‘Rising costs of material, equipment and especially lab bills make it not viable to increase the number of NHS patients.’

‘Too busy and not profitable.’

## **Conclusions**

- Whilst 37% of practices indicated a willingness to register NHS patients, the majority set criteria for registration. This may leave a significant number of people who may wish to register as new patients under the NHS unable to get registered. Some practices also reported that their lists may be open or closed depending on the workload and waiting times. Patients may therefore have difficulty in finding a dentist with open registration at any particular time.
- Some practices said they had the potential to expand but could not do so for financial reasons and/or inability to recruit dentists.

## Western Area

District Council Area	Total Number of Practices	Total Number of Practices which responded	Number of dentist chairs in each District Council area	Number of Practices registering NHS Adult Patients	Number of Practices registering 0-18yrs NHS patients	
Derry City Council	18	16	41	5	12	
Fermanagh City Council	15	13	32	7	11	
Limavady Borough Council	5	5	13	2	4	
Omagh District Council	10	10	25	2	8	
Strabane District Council	7	7	16	3	5	
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>40</b>	
District Council Area	Number of Practices holding a waiting list for registration	Number of practices setting criteria for NHS registration	Number of Practices offering any specialist service to patients with special or particular needs	% of NHS registered patients in Practices		
				75-100%	60-75%	<60%
Derry City Council	3	11	8	10	2	3
Fermanagh City Council	3	8	4	1	1	10
Limavady Borough Council	2	3	3	4	0	1
Omagh District Council	1	6	7	1	0	9
Strabane District Council	0	3	6	3	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>

## **7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of the survey show a mixed picture in relation to access to high street dental services across Northern Ireland. Whilst all areas do have dental practices open to registration, the application of various criteria and waiting times for appointments may mean that the public could experience difficulty in obtaining an appointment in their local area in what they feel is a reasonable timeframe.

In particular, the survey demonstrates that in all areas dental practices highlighted what they feel are barriers to the registration of NHS patients. The chief barriers being bureaucracy, workload and staffing issues (noted by 80 practices) and the level of remuneration offered by the HSC (52 practices).

In addition, the results would suggest that the public need to be further engaged and informed about the requirements of dental registration. The current arrangements require patients to re-register with their dentists every two years.

**It is therefore recommended that Patient and Client Council officers should:**

1. Maintain the results of the survey as a baseline to measure improvement brought about by the introduction of additional high street dental services to be delivered by Oasis Dental Care.
2. Repeat the survey in 2011 to gauge improvement or otherwise in relation to access to high street dental services.
3. Discuss with the Public Health Agency the need for better information about dental registration requirements.
4. Consider further public engagement regarding experience of patient access to high street dental services, to gain a patient's perspective on the implications of criteria for registration, waiting times etc in order to establish a qualitative baseline for current services.
5. Consideration should also be given to extending the study to include orthodontic services.

Remember you can contact your local office on

**Telephone 0800 917 0222**

or email [info.pcc@hscni.net](mailto:info.pcc@hscni.net)

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**Southern Area**

Quaker Buildings  
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Craigavon BT66 8BB

**Western Area**

'Hilltop'  
Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital  
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**South Eastern Area**

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