

## Stakeholder Briefing

### Update on Cheshire & Merseyside's Dental Improvement Plan – Year 1 Review

5 March 2025

#### Background

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside inherited delegated responsibility for NHS Dentistry within our sub-region from NHS England in April 2023.

Since then, one of our first priorities has been to develop an ambitious two year [Dental Improvement Plan](#) to help tackle some of the challenges currently facing NHS dental care.

This local plan builds on national reforms, and aims to increase access to both routine and urgent NHS dental care and improve oral health in the local population, backed by an extra £15 million of local funding to support the plan's delivery.

Two main areas of focus for this work to date have been:

- Incentivising contracts for providers of NHS Dentistry to encourage them to increase capacity for NHS patients
- Offering additional incentives to providers for supporting vulnerable patient groups

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside's Dental Improvement Plan has been developed working in close partnership with local professional networks such as the Local Dental Network, Local Dental Committees and NHS England's North West Dental Public Health team, and has also been closely informed by feedback Healthwatch, local authorities and other key stakeholders.

#### Key impacts in Year 1

Although there is still more work to do, some of the key areas of progress and impact from the first year of the plan's delivery (April 2024 – March 2025) are outlined below:

- **Improving routine access**

A total of 155 practices across Cheshire and Merseyside signed up for the New Patient Premium (nationally funded) to help treat patients who haven't been seen by a dentist for more than two years.

Between April and December 2024 (which is the latest quarter we have dental delivery figures available for), this resulted in the delivery of more than 70,000 additional patient appointments across the region – including 28,367 children, and 45,883 adults.

- **Enhancing urgent care**

A new network of dental practices was agreed in June 2023 to provide urgent care appointments for patients who are unable to access regular care – including via the Emergency Dental Helpline (**0161 476 9651**). Between April - December 2024, these practices saw 12,375 additional patients for urgent care treatment.

Across Cheshire and Merseyside, 76 dental practices have also signed up to deliver ‘Urgent Care Plus’ – a new scheme which offers additional funded sessions as an extension to the urgent care pathway, to help enable patients who have attended an urgent care appointment, to also receive a full examination and any further treatment required to help get them dentally fit again. A total of 9,679 patients were seen via this route between April and December 2024.

- **Supporting vulnerable patients**

Another project which has been developed locally aims to help improve access to new patients within the Cheshire and Merseyside boundaries, with a focus on supporting vulnerable patients by offering an incentive for practices to engage with local voluntary sector organisations, such as homeless centres and family hubs. A total of 53 local dental practices are signed up to the scheme, and data from 42 of these practices shows that more than 21,000 new patients have been seen via this route to date.

- **Improving oral health**

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside has committed £600,000 worth of funding towards the distribution of free dental packs containing toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste to children across the region, supported by the delivery of supervised toothbrushing sessions which aim to help improve dental health and reduce the need for tooth extractions amongst children.

These dental packs are currently being distributed to children in early years settings (2-5 year olds) across Cheshire and Merseyside, with priority distribution being given to those living in the 20% most deprived communities.

- **Addressing workforce challenges**

The plan has also been looking to address some of the longer-term workforce challenges in NHS dentistry, and we have just launched a recruitment incentive scheme to help tackle local dental workforce issues in more deprived areas, including areas of Liverpool and

Knowsley. All the allocations have been agreed with practices, with adverts for dentists now live.

- **Developing a new dental model**

A new 'proof of concept' service has also been piloted at a vacant practice in the Belle Vale area of Liverpool, which is close to the Knowsley boundary and in an area of high need, that offers dental sessions delivered by patient outcomes, rather than measured in strict units of dental activity against a set target. Again, this project has focused on supporting better access for dental care for vulnerable patient groups.

Over 4,000 patients have been referred to this service to date, including children, nursing and expectant mothers, patients referred from other hospital and social care settings, and asylum seekers.

The project is proving very popular with staff as they are being supported to focus on achieving better outcomes for patients who have previously struggled to access dental services. This supports the retention of NHS dentists and, in some cases, the flexibility offered has encouraged dentists providing private work to switch to provide sessions for the NHS.

It's a model that could be successfully replicated in other areas high need in Cheshire and Merseyside in the future, and plans are already in development for the launch of similar pilots in Halton and Knowsley in 2025/26.

## **Overall performance**

The Urgent Care Plus, Quality and Access and Belle Vale schemes combined have now delivered care to almost 50,000 'new' patients (defined as not having seen a dentist in two years or more) between April and December 2024 - which is the latest quarter we have dental delivery figures available for.

As a result of all this proactive work to improve dental access, dental practices in Cheshire and Merseyside are demonstrating measurable improvements, with the region currently ranked as 23rd out of a total of 42 regional systems across the country, up from a previous ranking of 28<sup>th</sup> before the improvement plan was launched.

It's also important to note that this ranking does not take into account any of the flexible local commissioning schemes we have introduced to improve patient outcomes and get patients dentally fit again, rather than just delivering against strict units of dental activity, or work to support some of the region's most vulnerable patients.

## **Next steps**

Planning is now underway for the delivery of Year 2 of this programme of work to improve both access to and the quality of NHS dental care for patients in Cheshire and Merseyside,

and will focus on continuing to build on these early successes and scaling up impact where possible.

We will continue to keep you updated on our progress with this over the coming months.

**You can access the full NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Dental Improvement Plan here: <https://www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk/latest/publications/plans-and-strategies/dental-improvement-plan-2024-26/>**

**ENDS**

## **Background notes on NHS dentistry**

### **How dental care works**

The NHS will provide any clinically necessary treatment needed to keep your mouth, teeth and gums healthy and free of pain.

There is no national registration system in NHS dentistry like there is in general practice. This means that patients do not need to register with a dental practice to receive NHS care, and can access any NHS dental practice that's convenient, regardless of geographic boundary.

Dental practices will advise on whether they have capacity to take on new NHS patients when you contact them – sometimes you may have to join a waiting list, or look for a different dentist the area, or be seen privately.

You may be asked to fill in a registration form at your first visit, but this is just to add you to their patient contacts database. It does not mean you have guaranteed access to an NHS dental appointment in the future.

### **If you need urgent dental treatment care, you can:**

- call your normal dental practice: some surgeries offer urgent appointments at short notice
- get help by calling [NHS 111](#) or the NHS Cheshire and Merseyside urgent dental helpline on: 0161 476 9651

### **Guidance on check ups**

Having a regular dental check up is recommended to help ensure good oral health, and spot any early signs of problems such as tooth decay, oral cancer and gum disease as follows:

- For adults with healthy teeth and gums, a dental check up may be provided up to **every two years**.
- Children with healthy teeth and gums will be offered a check-up **once a year**.

However, if you have any problems with your teeth, gums, or mouth, a dental practice may invite you to be seen again sooner. Your dental team will advise you about when you should have your next check up, based on their assessment of your clinical need.

## **Payment**

If you normally pay for NHS dental treatment, the cost will depend on what treatment you need. The fees for treatment are charged in three different bands.

Some people are also eligible for free NHS dental treatment, including those aged 18 or under (or 19 and still in education), pregnant women and those who have given birth in the past 12 months, and those entitled to certain benefits.

You can find more about the costs of different treatments and who is entitled to free care here: [Dental services - NHS](#)