



Public Health Wales

**Gathering people's stories to inform
communication and the General Dental Services
Reform Programme**

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1. Introduction

Background

Like many aspects of health, there are inequalities in oral health across Wales, many of which are linked to deprivation. This can be seen in both children and adults. Inequalities exist both in terms of oral health and access to dental services and may have been exacerbated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Oral Health and Dental Services' Response to the Healthier Wales Plan (2018) highlighted an ambition for an integrated, whole-system approach focussing on health & wellbeing and illness prevention. This also placed the patient at the centre of oral health provision, with an ambition to "work collaboratively with patients and the public to deliver evidence-informed personalised preventative-led care that takes account of patients' needs and their priorities for their own oral health".

As well as incentivising dental practices to promote prevention, this ambition recognises room for more engagement with patients to understand their perceptions of their own oral health needs, and help empower them to adopt preventative oral health behaviours. It also recognised the need to increase access to NHS dental care in Wales.

While this programme of General Dental Service reform stalled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is due to restart in April 2022. In order to facilitate this, it is necessary to understand the current situation of oral health in Wales, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on individual experiences of oral health, attitudes towards accessing dental services and people's ability to access such services.

As part of the process of gathering insights to help support the dental reform process, Public Health Wales commissioned Strategic Research & Insight (SRI) to collect people's stories of their oral health, particularly in light of the pandemic. People's stories provide valuable insight to understand experiences of health and healthcare. The objectives of this project were to collect people's stories on:

- How participants kept their mouth healthy before and during the pandemic
- How participants access information on oral health
- Experience of dental care needed during the pandemic

Method

SRI conducted twenty in-depth interviews during February, March and April 2022. This number of interviews best represented value for money and, given the topic, allowed us to reach data saturation (where the final elements of data collection begin to replicate data already collected).

The interviews sought to create a judgement-free space where individuals could tell their own stories and experiences of oral health and oral health care.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited by SRI, via an online 'recruitment screener'. This is essentially a short questionnaire that people interested in taking part need to complete to register their interest. This online screener asked key questions about respondent demographics, to ensure that they were eligible to take part, but also to ensure that we have a wide range of people taking part. People interested in taking part were also asked to provide their details so that SRI could get in contact with them if chosen to take part.

The online screener was distributed in two ways. Firstly, we used our trusted panel provider - [Cint](#). Cint provide us with a quick, easy and cost-effective way of finding research participants (panellists).

Secondly, we posted about the research on various community group social media pages. This included a link to the online screener, so that people could register their interest. This second method was predominantly used to target groups of people who are often harder to reach. This can include people who live in rural areas, people from minority backgrounds, and Welsh speakers. SRI also provided a telephone number to call, should people prefer to register their interest over the phone (including those with no or little access to the internet).

SRI received an excellent response, which allowed us to pick people from a range of different backgrounds, and with a range of different characteristics to take part.

Participants were given an incentive of £40 for taking part. This was a slightly more generous incentive than would normally be offered for depth interviews of this nature but was required to ensure that we were able to recruit the 'dentally anxious'. Without a good incentive, these participants may have been reluctant to share their experiences.

Recruitment criteria

Inequality in oral health is linked to deprivation. As a result, the key recruitment criteria was to ensure that participants lived in some of the most deprived areas of Wales, according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). SRI and Public Health Wales agreed that the participants should live in an area which is ranked within the 20th percentile of the most deprived communities in Wales.

This allowed us to recruit people who lived within some of the more deprived communities, but also allowed us to recruit participants based on other criteria. We also sought to recruit people from a mix of ages, genders, ethnicities, and people from lower social economic groups.

We also sought to recruit people with different levels of access to dental services. In the recruitment screener, potential participants were asked which of the following best described their situation:

- I am 'registered' with an NHS dentist
- I am 'registered' with a private dentist
- I am not 'registered' with a dentist
- I have both NHS and private treatment through my dentist
- I am on a waiting list to find a new NHS dentist
- I need a new dentist as my practice is no longer offering NHS funded care

SRI sought to recruit people with different access to dental services, excluding those who are 'registered' entirely with a private dentist, and had been with a private dentist for more than two years (i.e. before the pandemic).

Format of the interviews

Each interview lasted 30 minutes, on average. They were conducted by telephone or video call, depending on the participant's preference. Participants were offered the opportunity to conduct the interview in Welsh or English. Two chose to conduct the interview in Welsh, and the rest chose English.

Our researchers explained to participants that the focus was on hearing about their experiences in their own words.

We asked open question about oral health to prompt them to freely tell their stories. Participants varied in the extent to which they were happy to talk without further prompting. Where participants started to struggle to talk about their experiences, further open questions were asked. However, the tone was kept conversational, and participants were encouraged to tell their own stories, based on what they felt was important, as much as possible.

Story presentation

Each conversation was fully transcribed. Prominent narratives told by each participant were then identified and turned into 'stories' to represent their experiences. This sometimes meant moving around the order in which the participant had spoken their words. However, the words used in the stories were always those of the participant, and the sense of their narrative has been retained.

Explanation of summary of key narratives

The intention of this work is that the stories stand for themselves. To this end, our analysis is in the re-presentation of individuals' stories into coherent, prominent narratives. However, in the next section, to help you use the stories more easily, we have also provided a brief outline of the key narratives.

We have also provided an 'index' as a guide to some of the main themes (page 10). This index is presented as a grid. The main themes from all the narratives are across the top of the grid. The names of respondents are down the side of the grid. A tick in the grid indicates where a particular theme occurs, to some extent, in the narrative of a particular person. We hope that this will help readers select and make best use of the stories when looking for examples to illustrate particular points.

We believe that the usefulness of the stories is in the richness and variety of people's own words. And we encourage that they are used in this way.

2. Brief outline of key narratives

Challenges accessing NHS dental care

One of the strongest set of narratives that people told were stories of times when they had struggled to access NHS dental care.

Most common, were stories of times when people had been, or still are, unable to 'register' with a dental practice. It is clear that many people have been struggling to access routine and preventative dental care, as well as emergency care, via an NHS dental practice for a long time. One person said that they have instead relied on the emergency dentist for many years, apparently only being able to access care when treatment was absolutely needed. This situation caused feelings of anger, frustration and concern that the lack of access to care contributes to poor oral health. Suggestions included a need for more dentists and that everybody should have access to a dentist locally.

Covid-19 has exacerbated issues accessing care at NHS dental practices. Most clearly, this was when dentists were closed, or closed for anything except emergency treatment during periods of lockdown. However, some people told stories of finding it hard to access dental practices as restrictions have eased, particularly where practices have a backlog of people to see.

Some people told stories of themselves, or others, being unable to access even emergency dental care during Covid-19 restrictions. In most of these cases, they spoke of an inability to access any emergency care. One person talked of a friend who, in extreme pain with toothache, had waited seven weeks to see an emergency dentist and lost three teeth as a result. Another person talked about the problem of only being able to access the emergency dentist for one appointment, which meant that follow-up was not available where needed.

An underlying theme across some of the stories about being unable to access emergency treatment, was the way in which the concept of pain was used to judge who should be able to access the emergency dentist. One respondent, for example, could not understand how a health practitioner could judge the level of pain that someone is in over the phone. She remembered being in a high level of pain while the nurse told her that she couldn't be in enough pain for treatment as she was able to talk on the phone. Another said they wished they had exaggerated the level of pain they were in, to be able to access the care they needed.

In the stories that two people told, despite being in pain they felt that the emergency dental service was not aimed at someone in their position, and they therefore did not attempt to access it. Others complained of a lack of appropriate transport as a reason for not being able to access the emergency dentist.

Those able to access dental care

In contrast, some people told stories of being able to access dental care in the past, present and during various levels of Covid-19 restrictions. In some cases, these were the same individuals who at other points had been unable to access NHS dental care.

Mostly, these stories revolved around access people have, or have had, to NHS dental practices. In some cases, even people who could access NHS dental care at a practice, had to travel distances that they felt were unacceptable to do so.

One person gave a detailed account of the strong and consistent support a community dentist had given her son, an adult with additional needs, both before Covid-19 and during even the tightest of Covid-19 restrictions.

Across all the stories, there was variation in the extent to which people could access routine and emergency NHS dental care in Wales. Variation occurred both between people and across individual life courses.

Accessing dental care during Covid-19 restrictions

Many of those who accessed dental care (in one form or another) during various stages of Covid-19 restrictions, reported anxiety about the visit as well as the differences they noticed in visiting dental care settings (e.g. hand sanitising; no waiting room; one-in, one-out). One person said that they were anxious as to whether they would be allowed into the dentist surgery when they arrived (e.g. if they had a temperature they weren't aware of), especially as they had to travel far to the practice.

Most people understood the need for the Covid-19 practices that they experienced in the dental care setting they attended. Most found these practices to be reassuring. One person, who was prone to relating to what many people would describe as conspiracy theories in her stories, felt that the precautions were over the top.

Past experience of dentists and oral care

When people told stories about their past experiences of dentists and oral care, it often contextualised their current feelings about dentists.

For some, fear and anxiety of dentists came from bad experiences in the past. In telling these stories, their memories could seem visceral and stark. One person, for example, remembered an experience of a bad tooth extraction as one where she could feel the tooth being pulled and was pulled out of her chair herself as the tooth was being extracted.

Others have had dentists who had reassured them and helped them overcome anxiety. Or they have had dentists in the past that they felt were very good, even if they were not so happy with their current dentist.

Some appeared to have had mostly positive experiences of dentists and dental care. One talked about the advantages of a dentist who knew you, your fears and your oral health history. Understanding, sympathy, openness and being reassuring were among the qualities that people seemed to appreciate in a dentist.

Oral hygiene behaviour

In telling stories about their oral hygiene, people described a range of good and bad oral hygiene behaviour. It was not the case that some people/families had good oral hygiene behaviour and other people/families had poor oral hygiene behaviour. Instead, most people/families displayed a mixture of both good and bad behaviours. Many said that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their oral hygiene behaviour. For example, a lack

of routine (e.g. disrupting morning/evening brushing patterns), and increased sugary foods, were discussed.

Similarly, and often related to bad oral hygiene behaviour, many people gave examples of either their own poor oral health behaviour, or the poor oral health of others in their family. This could be past or present, and chronic or short-term.

People reported undertaking dental self-care at home in a range of ways.

As the following paragraphs show, at one end of the scale was the use of certain toothpastes and mouthwashes to help keep the mouth healthy at the other end, we heard about people who extracted their own teeth.

During Covid-19, some used, or were asked by their dentist to use, the home tooth-filling kits that are available in shops, although one person said that applying this was impossible. Some used saltwater to fight infections, whilst others used a mouthwash like Corsodyl when they had an infection.

Others removed plaque from their teeth, one using a knife, another using a sewing pick. Two people discussed how they had superglued their own bridges or dentures, which had broken. They were unable to get them mended as they had no access to dental care. The use of superglue both tasted horrible and didn't work, leaving them without some teeth during Covid-19, and making eating harder.

At the most extreme end was the person who, with very poor dental health, bad experience, a fear of dentists, and no access to NHS dental care had, over his life, slowly pulled his own teeth out with his fingers, using alcohol and painkillers to help numb the pain.

In their stories, some suggested long-term reliance on painkillers in lieu of being able to access treatment which would cure their mouth pain. One talked about the use of antibiotics instead of dental treatment, discussing how the GP would prescribe antibiotics when their patients could not access a dentist.

Information on oral health

Collecting people's narratives about when, how and where they access information on oral health was one of the initial project objectives. However, respondents rarely talked about this in their narratives. This suggests that oral health information is not high on people's priorities. It also isn't as important to them as their own oral health, and accessing NHS dental services, for example. Where appropriate in a conversation, researchers prompted respondents on accessing oral health information.

Some people talked about where they get information about oral health from in general. Very little of this came from dentists. One person even said that that they had to seek out information themselves as they felt that dentists did not have time for patients to phone them up and ask questions.

The internet was a key source of information for one person, especially if they were worried about a particular oral health issue that they had. However, they felt it was challenging to know which information to trust. They did not assess the quality of information based on sources, but seemed to triangulate data, trusting a point of view when it was expressed by multiple sources. Another person did not trust the internet for information at all. They felt that there were too many opinions online, and they did not know which to trust.

Other people found information on oral health in a more passive fashion. In other words, they had not actively sought information but had come across it doing something else. For example, the same person who actively used the internet, also talked about seeing adverts on TV and social media. Another said that the only information they ever saw was if they happened to read the back of a toothpaste box.

One person said that the NHS should put up more information about emergency dentists so that everyone knows that they exist, that they can be accessed, and how to access them.

Other stories revealed feelings about the availability of information during Covid-19 restrictions. Some of the narratives revealed uncertainty as to what dental care was available to them during restrictions as they talked about uncertainty around what was available, or said what they "thought" may have been available.

One person had received information from a dentist after a member of their family had received treatment during Covid-19 restrictions. However, they had not read the information they had been given. Another received information on behalf of her adult son, who had additional learning needs, and for whom she was a carer, from the community dentist throughout the Covid-19 restrictions. Three people said that advice should have been sent out during Covid-19 about oral health care, what treatment was available at different stages of the restrictions, and how to access it.

Other themes

The cost, and rising costs, of dental treatment were a concern for some. Related to this, some participants reported having to purchase private dental treatment as they were unable to access NHS care, but this also raised worries about cost.

The relationship between mental wellbeing and oral health was discussed by some people. Oral health issues (e.g. missing teeth, bleeding gums, fear of bad breath) can knock self-confidence. This can be especially problematic in customer-facing jobs. One person reported that his wife, who had poor oral health, and poor looking teeth, liked wearing a facemask during Covid-19 as it hid her mouth.

Some talked about the extent to which they have managed to educate their own children about oral health care. For some, they were determined that their children would have better oral health and understanding of oral health than they did while growing up. People had mixed success in achieving this. For some, the school dentist had been the only person who had taught them about oral health, and gave them toothpaste and a toothbrush, when they were little. This led to one person saying the school dentist should be brought back to help educate children.

One person was motivated to try and improve his, and his wife's, oral health as a result of talking about his own oral health challenges. Particularly, as they were not able to register with a dentist, he was going to try and get her to the emergency dentist, despite the physical and transport difficulties this would necessitate overcoming.

3. Summary index of key narratives

	Had challenges registering with an NHS dentist	Challenges accessing NHS dental care before/after various Covid restrictions	Challenges accessing NHS dental care during various Covid restrictions	Able to access NHS dental care before/after various Covid restrictions	Able to access NHS dental care during various Covid restrictions
Aisha	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Andrew				✓	✓
Bethan		✓		✓	✓
Darren	✓			✓	✓
Delyth	✓		✓	✓	✓
Eleri	✓		✓	✓	✓
Geoff	✓	✓			
Helen	✓	✓	✓	✓	
John		✓			
Josh	✓		✓		
Karen				✓	
Leah			✓	✓	✓
Liz				✓	✓
Margaret	✓	✓	✓		
Nadine	✓	✓			
Nerys		✓	✓		
Philippa			✓	✓	
Robert	✓			✓	
Vivian	✓				
Yomi	✓	✓	✓		✓

Note: a tick indicates where a particular theme is mentioned, to some extent, in the narrative of a particular respondent.

	Felt strange obtaining dental care during Covid restrictions	Positive visit to dentist during restrictions Practice dentist	Has had to access private dental care due to challenges accessing NHS care	Experience of dentists and oral care	
				Bad experience	Good experience
Aisha	✓	✓		✓	
Andrew		✓			✓
Bethan	✓	✓			✓
Darren	✓	✓		✓	✓
Delyth				✓	✓
Eleri			✓		✓
Geoff				✓	
Helen					
John					
Josh					
Karen					
Leah					✓
Liz	✓	✓			✓
Margaret				✓	
Nadine			✓		
Nerys				✓	✓
Philippa	✓		✓		
Robert					
Vivian	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yomi			✓		

	Oral hygiene behaviour		Poor oral health status	Dental self-care		Information		Reliance on painkillers/antibiotics due to lack of access to dental care
	Good	Bad		Before/after various Covid restrictions	During various covid restrictions	Discussion of sources of information	Discussion of availability of information during Covid	
Aisha	✓	✓	✓		✓			
Andrew	✓	✓	✓					
Bethan		✓	✓					
Darren		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Delyth	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Eleri								✓
Geoff				✓	✓			✓
Helen			✓	✓		✓		
John	✓	✓	✓			✓		
Josh	✓	✓					✓	
Karen	✓		✓					
Leah		✓						
Liz	✓	✓			✓		✓	
Margaret			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nadine			✓					
Nerys		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Philippa		✓	✓				✓	
Robert	✓		✓					
Vivian	✓			✓				
Yomi	✓		✓					✓

	Fear of dentist / dental anxiety	Discussion of relationship between mental wellbeing and oral health	Cost of dental care is an issue	Educating their own children	Participant believes that they are not allowed to access emergency dentist in current situation
Aisha					
Andrew					
Bethan					
Darren	✓	✓		✓	
Delyth	✓		✓		
Eleri			✓		
Geoff					✓
Helen		✓			
John					
Josh			✓	✓	
Karen		✓			
Leah				✓	
Liz				✓	
Margaret	✓	✓			✓
Nadine			✓		
Nerys	✓				
Philippa			✓		
Robert					
Vivian	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yomi			✓	✓	

4. Participant stories

Name:	Aisha
Age:	35-44
Health Board:	Hywel Dda University Health Board

Aisha has found it impossible to access a dentist after her recent house move, meaning she has to travel a long way with her family to see their dentist, although she does not drive

We used to live in London so when I moved in Wales I was registered with a dentist...in Merthyr Tydfil... from 2017 with them...I walked with my friend and I said I need to register with my dentist and I went in, I just took the form, it was that easy.

Last February I moved in Swansea...I tried to change my dentist but here it's very difficult in Swansea so I didn't change it, I tried twice. In one day, I spoke like twelve dentists around this area and they all are fully booked. Some of them have got five hundred people in the queue so they're not taking any new patients...it is frustrating.

Every six months I have to take [the children to the dentist] but I don't know how I'm going to do it. I call in here so many places, I ask them to give me only appointments for kids, give me a dentist only for kids but nobody agreed to give me that. They said if there's any emergency, any pain, then you can call us, but we don't have any places so I didn't change theirs, they are still with the Merthyr dentist.

I have to go to, if I need to see him I have to go back to Merthyr yeah...[they] don't know that [I've moved], I didn't tell them that. I don't want to change it until I get one from here because it's better to keep registered with one dentist, if you don't have any registration then it will not be good, that's why I haven't changed it yet.

Every dentist has to have enough, like we came here, we don't get any registration for a dentist...everybody has to get the opportunity to get a registration at least... and you are not taking any new patients that's not good for others. I'm really suffering, I want to see my daughters every six months with their dentist because my younger one's getting her new teeth...but I have to go to Merthyr all the way to show her. As a mother I'm feeling that it's not good, everybody should get the opportunity or everybody should get the right to register with the dentist where they are based. It's like the GP.

Oral health issues due to a thyroid issue which was not picked up for a long time and a bad experience with an incorrect tooth filling have contributed to Aisha feeling nervous of visiting the dentist

I had to go through so many things, basically I had a thyroid problem...my teeth was breaking down because of my calcium level so, my dentist couldn't find out that, they'd done so many tests, they had to do so many...but every time I asked them why are these things happening, I look after my teeth very well, I brush twice but I don't know why it was breaking and painful. So they couldn't give me any answer. But when they operate, done

my thyroid, then my calcium level become normal and now I have got no problem with my teeth...my hospital doctor told me because of the calcium level, up and down, they say, my bone can break, my teeth can break and I said yeah, because I'm suffering with that because on that time I had nine teeth filling... the teeth was breaking like powder, it was very problematic that time. But since they took out my thyroid, everything is fixed.

It was, I think it's a new dentist...I showed him one tooth, it is painful, and he say no, he thought the other one is painful so he... did filling on my other tooth...when I went back next day, I think he did something with my wrong tooth, so they checked it and they filled the other one. The senior person of the Merthyr dentist came and spoke to me and they said yeah, it was the wrong teeth and then they fix it. They agreed with that. I never seen that dentist again, I have never seen him. It was a young boy; I can't tell you the name even.

They did so many things with my mouth and teeth, you know, so I'm very worried, whenever I'm going there, nowadays...I'm nervous of the dentist.

In general, Aisha has good oral health and promotes this with her children. However, she worries that over-brushing has caused issues for her daughter and the pandemic has had a negative impact on some of this behaviour

I am [generally good at oral hygiene]. In my household I don't allow...not regularly, I don't allow my kids with any sugary drinks...[if] they have chocolate and things, I know too much brushing is bad for mouth as well but, they go, straight away I send them, oh you had chocolate, go brush your teeth. That kind of practice going on in my household...[I'm] very strict about their brushing technique, you got to brush...have chocolate or sweet, go brush your teeth.

[My daughter] used to like brushing teeth and I think because of me, build up that habit, she lose...eight teeth together, they took out, in one day they took out eight teeth. When she has got teeth problem, my younger one was tolerant person so she never come to me and say okay I've got toothache...but her teacher told me that I think she has got toothache so they have noticed that, I haven't, I'm sorry to say that I haven't, cos I was quite confident with my looking after teeth and mouth, you know, but her teacher said so, then I took her to dentist and dentist said yeah, she has got one or two teeth that type, then slowly, slowly it's gone, first they want to take out four teeth then they say now she's got this teeth problem, so eight they take out in one day.

When you are at home, your routine goes breakdown and moneywise everything wise, when you are stressed or when you have no job and things, that makes you worry so, with my stress I think I look after them less, with the kids and things but it was a habit, they have to brush twice, they go to toilet before going to bed, they brush their teeth, and the early morning as well. It was in the morning time, after breakfast sometimes, sometimes twelve o'clock, I'm talking about during pandemic not when there's school, so sometimes twelve o'clock, they remind me, oh I haven't done my brush so they go and done their brush in the morning time. But night time, before going to bed, always is like, they don't go to sleep if they don't brush. [Also,] lockdown, more sweets, I make cake, pastry at home, staying at home, and making food. We have nothing to do you know [laughs] that's the only thing we can do, go for a walk, and making food.

During the pandemic, Aisha struggled to get an appointment, and when she did get an appointment, she was nervous until she saw her regular dentist who calmed her down

2021 I think they started opening the dentist, so, 2021...I visit my dentist...because my filling came off...it was a hole all the time, in pandemic time, yeah, a small hole so they didn't give me the appointment but as soon as they opened the dentist, I called them and they gave me an appointment... it was twice, two days he kept me...he checked my filling, he did it one day [and said] you have to come back after next week I think.

It was definitely different cos they were take me in from front door and they leave me from back door, yeah, it was definitely different, it wasn't normal.... I was [nervous] because, I don't know...can I go in or not because where they check with the machine, fever and things, I was thinking then what if my fever come more hot, what if my temperature become more and they send me home!.

I was nervous I should say, how they were acting, you had to stand outside, they will call, someone will come, they will check your temperature and then give you another mask, the mask you're wearing they will not take you inside with that. Yes, it was very different that time. [But] as soon as I see my dentist I wasn't, because he was very nice person. Some people have got that personality, you know, and he was very calm and nice person, so in the way he treated you, it was very good so no, as soon as I see my dentist then I saw that it's him, because they put you in any dentist, you have to request for someone and that time I went to, like requesting them, I have got hole that need to be filled so it was me who force for the appointment, I thought that they would be able to put me on someone else but luckily he was there so when I saw him I wasn't nervous.

It was very easy [to get an appointment], before pandemic, ...they gave you straight away, emergency appointment, it was very easy. Not that quickly [in the pandemic]. They were refusing to give appointment. We don't have appointment they said. Do you have pain? Is it emergency? It takes 2, 3 days I think...I have to call them back continuously. And they ask you several questions, do you have emergency toothache?

First they asked me to buy a filling from local pharmacy and put it in, I bought it and, honestly, I'm telling you, six pounds something it was priced, I bought it and it was not helping at all, like I can't put it, I'm not a dentist, I was trying, I asked my husband to put it, he can't as well so I told them that I can't, they asked me is it painful, it wasn't that painful though but I say to them it is painful to get the appointment.

Name:	Andrew
Age:	35-44
Health Board: Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board	

Despite dental pain from tooth grinding and an underdeveloped jaw, Andrew can't keep up with a strong oral hygiene routine

I was born with a jaw that didn't grow properly to meet my top teeth, so there is a gap between my top teeth and bottom teeth. I get a lot of issues with my jaw. Growing up, I had to see an orthodontist and have a special brace and an operation where they had to break my jaw and bring it forward to meet my top teeth. My teeth are fine now, you can't see any issues, but that's the biggest issue I had really. And I have to wear a gumshield at night because I grind my teeth.

I brush once a day, not twice. I don't like brushing my teeth before I go to bed. I don't know what it is, but I don't like doing it. I do it first thing in the morning when I get up. I eat a lot of rubbish - fast food, frozen food and chocolate - but thank god I have very strong teeth. I've had very few fillings over the years, but do make sure I go for my six-month check-up. I'm lucky really.

Andrew was impressed with his dentist's response when his dental pain got worse during the pandemic

In 2021 the issue with my jaw started again and I would wake up with pain that went into my skull. It was fine getting hold of the dentist, I phoned, and they saw me the next day. They asked me if I'd had Covid or if I knew anyone who had Covid. Then you had to ring the bell and the receptionist would let me in, wear a mask, then it was about a 20 minute wait. I filled in some forms and went in and explained and he said I was right, that I was grinding my teeth down. There was a bit of a wait for the impression but I'm going to get a new gum shield for the night, and he might refer me to a specialist. He's also given me exercises I can do for my face and teeth, and he told me to floss. I did start flossing but I went off the boil. I try to do all the exercises – bring my jaw forward and side to side – to try to loosen it. But there isn't much you can do apart from break the jaw and bring it forward, which they did when I was younger.

It was fine seeing the dentist. I was a bit worried because I've known about this condition for years but wondered why it was happening again, but they are doing all they can. He knows the problems I have with my teeth, and fair play he's looking out for me.

Andrew believes that six-monthly check-ups are important, even if he hasn't always attended them

I've always gone to the dentist, even as a child. I'm one of four and we've always looked after our teeth and go to our check-ups. Even though we eat rubbish, we go to the dentist every six months.

If I don't get a letter after six months then I'll contact them. They did once cancel me off the list because I'd missed two appointments, I had to write a letter asking them to take me back, which they did. I had to explain why I missed them and why they should take me back.

Andrew most often buys the cheapest toothpaste available

I live on a budget so I buy the cheapest toothpaste I can, but if I'm feeling flush I'll buy a more expensive one. I don't look for dental information but sometimes I'll see some adverts on TV about a special toothpaste, or if I'm in the shop and I saw there was one of offer I might buy it, especially if it's teeth whitening or something, because I drink a lot of tea and that stains your teeth.

Name:	Bethan
Age:	35-44
Health Board:	Cardiff and Vale Health Board

Bethan has looked after her health during the pandemic. She lost weight and started taking 'herbal remedies' to improve her health. However, some of these herbal remedies may be of detriment to her health.

I get along really well with my dentist. She'll talk me through what she's going to do and asks whether or not I'm OK with it or not. She might mention an X ray, but I'd say that I don't want to do it because of the radiation, and she's fine with that. She accepts who I am.

Before the pandemic, I used a fluoride toothpaste. I did some research and now I'm using fluoride free toothpaste. I think it's a lot better. Fluoride toothpaste isn't good for you. It's basically poison. I now use a more natural toothpaste which is fluoride free. It's actually from Holland and Barrett, I think it's Euthymol. There's no fluoride in it whatsoever. I also use a fluoride free mouthwash.

My brother told me about it, and then I saw some groups about it on Facebook. They also talked about pills you can take to try and stop you getting Covid. Throughout the pandemic I've been taking shiitake mushroom supplements, and of course it's anti-viral, and Covid is a virus. I've not had Covid, even though I've been in contact with four people who have had it.

She visited the dentist in early 2021, but the amount of PPE worn by the dentists made her a bit nervous.

I had veneers put in. They've come off a couple of times, and luckily I was able to get appointments during the pandemic. I was very lucky because I was hearing about people who couldn't get an appointment at all.

It was like a scene out of ET. There were all these respirators on, all this heavy PPE, these head things on, and I was just thinking 'oh my god'. If they felt comfortable that's fine, but it was a bit much. I wasn't frightened, but it did make you nervous – 'all this for a bit of dental treatment'. We've had viruses around for years, and they were treating it like it's Ebola.

Bethan visited the dentist again in November 2021, but feels that dental practices need to 'get back to normal' and offer, and promote, check-ups again.

I also had a filling during the pandemic. They were brilliant with that, got me in within a few days because I was in pain. It felt safe, they wore all the PPE, but it did feel a little bit over the top, like respirators and things like that. I was thinking, 'why?'.

The only thing I would say is they don't call you for check-ups anymore. It's just necessary work. They're not calling people for those (check-ups) anymore, which I think they should be doing now because we're at the end of the pandemic. They need to do check-ups to check people's oral health before they get an issue and before the issue gets really painful. Which I think they should be doing now. But going to the dentist during the pandemic wouldn't bother me now. If they did check-ups then I'd go, there's no reason not to now with Covid, there's nothing to be scared about now.

Name:	Darren
Age:	35-44
Health Board:	Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

Darren and his partner both have poor oral health

I never had great teeth...I was attending the dentist and my mouth was getting worse, I was starting to get gum disease, I suppose. The dentist, he said before he committed to doing any work or anything on it, that I needed to go away and use some prescribed toothpaste from the chemist for a couple of months before he would work on it.

At the moment, yeah, I'm treading eggshells on the path but I'm not actually in pain at the moment so it just goes to the back of your mind. And now it's a total mess, the gum disease has got worse [during lockdown]...bits of teeth have broken off, well, teeth are falling out, bits broken, I can physically see the gums getting blacker around the gum area, they've definitely got worse over the last two years.

My partner's similar to me, her mouth's really bad, hurting and just pain and she had to go and get something done. They didn't do anything though but that's what it was. She just couldn't handle the pain any more... she was walking around rattling, she was taking that many [painkillers] she was doing badly. They've got her on a programme, they've set her out a course of work now. Just this week she had her first three teeth out actually.

The family have had mixed success in being able to access NHS dental care. Darren has not really tried to access dental care despite needing it

I kind of drifted out of contact with the dentist and as far as they're concerned now I'm not registered with them any more because it's been so long since I've been to the dentist. Since my partner's been for her teeth, I keep saying I need to phone them and ask them, physically ask them about me, but I haven't, I keep putting it off to be honest. But I haven't physically asked them if I am registered with them.

The rest of my family all have appointments. Me and my partner were registered but she had problems with her mouth so she had to phone an emergency dentist and to cut a long story short, the emergency dentist appointment was in our old dentist but she was on the records so the dentist just took her back on...once they put her name into the computer, her name come up and the dentist, not knowing any different, just set her up for her appointments so she slipped back in.

We were in pretty quick once the initial contact had been made, an emergency appointment, it was a same day appointment...there definitely was a bit of us that thought it would have been a struggle, harder than it actually was because of what was going on we weren't sure if they were actually open...it was actually quicker than normal to get the initial appointment, I wouldn't say the work was quicker because that definitely wasn't, but to just get that initial first appointment.

I think one of [the children] was registered before the pandemic and one registered during...One of the children definitely had [an emergency appointment] because that's how it kind of got initiated back with the dentist because the child had toothache and that and that was during the pandemic.

Fear and bad experiences have played a part in Darren's fear and nervousness of dentists

I think it's been instilled in me because...my parents really didn't take me to the dentist. I can never remember going as a kid, just to the school dentist you know.

To be honest, it's the needle at the beginning, I just don't like needles at all...I know I'll have to have something done, a hundred percent and it's that initial start off. Once it's started I'm not so bad but it's just getting started.

I've been to a few dentists throughout my life and you always get good ones and bad ones don't you? And it's kind of weird cos the last few times everything's been great, you know, we haven't had any problems but I did go to one once and he scratched me gum and like, that wasn't a good experience. I don't know what could have been done different, I suppose it was an accident but didn't own up to it or nothing, or didn't have an explanation. I suppose, I just needed to be told something had happened and I'm going to have some pain, but just left to go without being told, that wasn't a good experience.

Darren's fear of the dentist means that he won't attend until the pain is unbearable

I need to phone them and I need to be proactive about it but no doubt until the day that I can't take the pain I won't do it.

As well as putting off seeing the dentist, Darren says that his poor oral hygiene is also partly based on poor oral health behaviour and lifestyle choices. Some of his poor oral hygiene behaviours have got worse in lockdown.

I haven't been [to the dentist] because there's been nothing wrong with me mouth, I suppose, because I haven't actually been in physical pain, over the last few years I have had pain but I took painkillers to get over it.

[I didn't see a dentist regularly because] I don't know, just lifestyle I suppose, just didn't take it to serious, made a huge mistake, if I could ever turn back time...it was a lifestyle choice I suppose, I was taking too many drugs and doing too many wrong things and in and out of prison, stuff like that [and my oral health suffered as a result] definitely. It was my own fault, I wasn't in one place long enough to actually be registered with a dentist, it was just something I never did, and being in prison, there was a dentist there but the queues for them were ridiculous, you'd have to be there for a five year sentence to even get seen.

To be honest, with all the lockdowns and stuff, I'm not saying I religiously brush my teeth every day anyway, but on the lockdown definitely I could go a whole week without brushing teeth because of how lazy the whole situation was. And I suppose drinking

sugary drinks and alcohol just because we had nowhere to go, nothing to do, that's why consumption of alcohol and energy drinks increased.

Darren has not actively sought out information on oral health, did not read information when he was given it and was not sure that any form of communication would convince him to change his oral health behaviours

If I'm honest, I really don't get information about it. If I was to say I got it anywhere, it would be reading the back of a toothpaste box, that's about as far as the extent that I've ever gone to find out how to look after me mouth.

[When asked if the dentist gave them any information to help them with maintaining oral health at home during the pandemic] There was actually pamphlets we were given actually with our leaving piece of paper telling us what had been done and everything but whether they got read or not is a different question but yeah, there were definitely pamphlets and stuff like that.

[When asked if there is any type of communication that would encourage him to visit a dentist sooner than he does currently] I don't know, I couldn't say there would be, yeah, [laughs] maybe some of that subliminal advertising on the TV, we need to get some of that in our heads about oral hygiene instead of advertising us to buy stuff. But I can't think of anything that would get my attention.

Darren found that while he and his family were nervous about visiting the dentist during Covid, and were unsure what treatment they could access, the process was more positive than they anticipated

[My child] would have [gone to the dentist], it would have been in the summer of 2020 because we had to send pictures of his mouth and stuff like that. [My partner] was in 2021, October.

Because we weren't regularly attending I'd say no I didn't [know about what dental services were available during the pandemic], because we didn't use them until we needed them. Until the mouth was sore, until someone was in pain, we never noticed any difference of how we used it.

[When asked if they noticed any differences to the dentist as it was pre-pandemic] Only in the retrospective, PPE and the screens and stuff like that, all the visible stuff, I wouldn't say I noticed anything different, the fact that there wasn't any people in the waiting room maybe, that's a bit eerie, being empty.

As a family we're all generally quite nervous of the dentist anyway but I would say with the Covid added, at the time it was mask wearing, it was wearing all that kind of stuff so yeah it was definitely, it was added stress to the whole situation...like, catching Covid because at the time, it was one of them places, a bit like going to the hairdressers, you'd have to come into close contact with other people.

To be honest, it did make you feel safer once you realised that everybody's got the precautions on and you can physically see them with the plastic gloves and whatnot that nobody's touching anything and it's silly really anyway, because the dentist would have that on anyway wouldn't he, on a normal day.

I don't think I did notice a difference [between the visit with his child and his partner] because we're just so used to it now, I don't think I was looking for it later on. I remember at the beginning, with [my son], that was more intense because it was all new and fresh.

Then coming to October, the second time, because we'd been going through it for so long, for eighteen months like, everything was prepared, there was screens everywhere, it was a different set up you know. And like I said, we're all used to only sitting one on the bus and things like that by now aren't we so, seeing every other chair not filled.

I wouldn't say we tried to keep [my son] away from Covid...but because he's only young, I don't think he knew any different, it was just a nervous dentist trip for him. He would have been six, so he was young anyway, so it was just a nervous dentist experience for him, rather than the Covid experience.

...to be honest we had quite a good experience considering that there was a pandemic on, I think it all went pretty smooth for us. It was actually easier because the place being empty, and easier that it was like, no waiting, straight in.

Both Darren and his partner have experienced poor mental wellbeing in relation to their poor oral health

I actually lost me front teeth when I was about twenty, my teeth got knocked out, and just from that point on I just really didn't care about me teeth, I know it sounds terrible but...I'd say for about three or four years, maybe a bit longer, I had no front teeth so I just didn't even open my mouth, I was embarrassed at not having teeth... that wasn't a great time and once I got them fixed I felt much better.

And at the moment now, with my partner, she doesn't like her teeth so, we're taking away masks, she's going to stay in a mask until her teeth are finished...it's going to be a long road to get there but she can't wait to get to the end of that road either. For the mental health aspect of it, for feeling confident you know.

Darren is keen that his children do not follow the same poor oral hygiene patterns as he and his partner

So far our children have been to the dentist and they haven't had a bad experience, I wouldn't like for them to have a bad experience at this stage because that could really knock you for the future. [When they are adults they should] be able to look after their teeth, yeah, they should be on autopilot shouldn't they by then?

...actually brushing my teeth with the kids in the morning, they should brush their teeth but I don't, every morning, but it's a big thing with them because, neither me nor my partner want them to have teeth like ours. So definitely do try to get on top of them.

And I suppose...we should make more of a deal of it, rather than just brushing your teeth, we should actually sit down and let them know how important it is because it is a whole thing isn't it... oral hygiene, not just brushing your teeth so, that's a good point, you've made me think now we should emphasise a bit more on it.

Name:	Delyth
Age:	55-64
Health Board: Swansea Bay University Health Board	

Delyth did not visit the dentist very often when she was young

Like a lot of people my age, dentistry wasn't great when I was young, so I then had a fear of the dentist. Because of that I didn't go very often and so my teeth got into a bit of a state. It took me a long time start going back to the dentist regularly again.

She found a dentist she liked, and then started visiting regularly

I then went to the same dentist for years and built up a rapport with them, and I'd go to the hygienist as well. I went for a check-up every 6 months and a hygienist every 3 months. I brushed my teeth twice a day and used mouthwash every other day. I don't smoke, I eat veg, but I also enjoy sweet treats, and the old vino! I know it's not good for your teeth, but it's give and take with these things.

She needed to visit the dentist during the pandemic, but her issue was not classed as urgent

When the pandemic hit, I just couldn't see him [the dentist]. I wasn't in severe pain, but my mouth did hurt. I called them and said that I have a tooth that's rocking back and forth, but they said they aren't taking appointments and that they will be in touch as soon as they have appointments. They asked if I was in acute pain, and you don't want to lie, even though maybe I should have, so I said no.

In the end, her tooth ending up falling out. She was devastated to lose a tooth

In the end my tooth ended up falling out. I was horrified. I went to see the dentist and they said there's nothing they could have done, but had they seen me I think they could have done something. I was devastated though. When you're in your sixties you have to be careful, because if you lose too many teeth then your mouth starts to collapse a bit. I know that sounds a bit dramatic, but I want to look decent. I don't want to be someone with no teeth. As a woman you want to keep yourself feeling the same, feeling ok about yourself.

When she visited the dentist, she also had a filling put in

On my front tooth I had a little black bit on it. It looked rotten, but it was actually a little hole. So, the dentist filled it but he's done such a bad job. I know they're stressed, but it was uncomfortable in my mouth, and since then I've had such sensitivity.

She visited the dentist again to replace the missing tooth, and told the dentist how unhappy she was with the filling

I had an appointment then for 3 weeks later to put that false tooth in. I paid for that, as you have to put a deposit down with my dentist for work like that. But in those three weeks I was just so uncomfortable. So I went back and said to him that I'm really not happy with the filling, it's so uncomfortable, and I can feel it behind my front tooth all the time, and all my right side has become sensitive, something I've never had before. But all

he did, was he gave me toothpaste! Toothpaste! I thought my god, toothpaste has not worked until now, what did he think I was doing before? So I decided that I'm not going to have this false tooth put in. I was wary of having any more work done from him.

I was disappointed, I was crying. I told him I wasn't confident of the next treatment, the false tooth being put in. I went back three months later for the hygienist, and I said 'look at my filling – he's wrecked the back of my teeth! Of course, the hygienist wasn't going to admit it, but I could tell that they were a bit sheepish about it. And then they asked me for money for the hygienist, I couldn't believe it!

She was expecting that the money put down for the false tooth would be reimbursed, but the dentist had no record of her deposit

I said that I had credit with them because I gave them a deposit for the false tooth, which I didn't get done in the end. They just refused, they said they didn't even have a record of it, so I've lost that money now. I've stopped going back to the dentist as often now because I can't afford it, especially as they took money off me for the false tooth, which they owe me! And of course I paid cash, so I had no bank receipts.

Because of this ordeal, she wants to move dentists, but she can't find anywhere else that will accept NHS patients

I'd like to move dentists but nowhere accepts new patients. I'm devastated about the whole ordeal. Because I've been there so long I would have expected better treatment. But I don't go now as often – I don't want to be paying for their cars or whatever when they're pocketing my money!

I'm due for a check-up in three months, and I will go to that. But when he asks me how I am, I'll say 'I'm bloody awful! I've lost a tooth, my filling still hurts! What do you expect?'

I just felt let down by my dentist. The disappointment that you feel. No one wants to feel as if they aren't being treated well when you're paying for a service.

Name:	Eleri
Age:	25-34
Health Board:	Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

Eleri went years without having a dentist, but eventually became 'registered' with a dentist again

I lost my dentist for years and I had to phone around to try and get an NHS dentist but got nowhere. I left my number with a dentist in Caernarfon. I got a call around 2 years ago saying I had a place. I hadn't seen anybody before that for around 8 years.

However, her father hasn't been able to find an NHS dentist

My father, who's 65, hasn't been able to get an NHS dentist. He's just had a bill for £700 to get treatment. He was in the same place as I was but then lost it as I did.

Eleri had a good experience of visiting the dentist during the pandemic, but also a poor experience

I had toothache just before the pandemic, I couldn't go and see the dentist then because of the pandemic. When I eventually got to see him, I had a slot of around 5 minutes, and I got some antibiotics then.

Apart from toothache, I had I thought I had a hole in my tooth, but apparently, it's not a hole, it's the shape of my tooth. I didn't feel that they gave me much time when I went to the dentist, it felt like I opened and closed my mouth, and I was sent home. I was only there for 2 minutes. It wasn't what I expected. I was given antibiotics [again] and sent home. I wish I had been given a clean and polish. I do feel short changed. I'd like to go back and get the complete treatment that I don't think I got during the pandemic.

However, she feels that her children were well looked after when they visited the dentist

With the children on the other hand, they've been amazing. My daughter needed a filling and I thought that it would be the same as my dentist, that she wouldn't get it done. [It was] completely different treatment for the children. I think because they're children.

Name:	Geoff
Age:	65-74
Health Board: Aneurin Bevan University Health Board	

A combination of a fear of dentists, bad experience with dental treatment and the inability to register with an NHS dentist has led Geoff to take his oral health care into his own hands. This includes:

Extracting his own teeth

When I was younger I was scared of going to the dentist, so I would pull my own teeth out, which is weird. I went to a dentist... I was only in my twenties, about twenty-four, if that...one of my back teeth by here, I was eating a pasty and I bit down on it and put a big hole in my tooth. When I went to the dentist then...he weren't bothered with that, he said you're having a script for penicillin, he didn't say come back...Well after that I thought well if he's not bothered about it, you know what I mean?

If they started to hurt, I would try and wiggle them, loosen them a bit, and have a couple of beers, go to the pub or the club, go home, take two painkillers, yank it out, straight to bed. [I would use my] fingers, bit of tissue paper, do the back ones as well. I did a wisdom tooth, that was giving me hell, it was coming loose anyway, just couldn't get at it tidy, so then I finally got that out, on that one, there was like three prongs on it.

Well, I had taken the best part of my front teeth out, one wisdom tooth and then I took another one out from the other side of my mouth, a back tooth. And I thought, this is getting harder and harder now so I made an appointment with a dentist in Bargoed, and he had a look and...he took my incisors out first of all and then he just gave me four front teeth, was it four or six, I can't remember now, what was left of my teeth then, I just

attach them on. And then I'd go back every year...kept on having abscesses, so the dentist...said, Geoff...the best thing to do is take all your teeth out, I think I was 38, something like that, so I said well, carry on then. So he took them all out...what was left there anyway.

Fixing his own dentures

I got dentures but my top set have broke in half [about 5 years previously] and I can't get in to a dentist to get them fixed...me first set of full dentures I had, one of the front teeth kept falling out and I kept on picking it up off the floor, washing it, drying it off and superglue, stick it back in, the taste of that stuff is horrendous.

When I told them that this same front tooth keeps falling out, he...gave me a false set again and these are the ones that's split in half. Same thing with them, I tried supergluing them but as soon as it gets warm, they fall apart again.

Removing his own plaque with a knife

I do get a build up of plaque on the bottom set. I just get a sharp knife then and just pick away at it.

And using saltwater as a painkiller

I still use toothpaste on all my gums and that and if I get any pain in there, I just gargle salt warm water and that seems to work.

Geoff says that he and his partner are unable to access NHS dental care via a dental practice despite needing treatment. While a lot of this is based on assumption, for Geoff, the lack of access to dental care is an issue that is not being addressed.

I don't think that I am [registered] anymore because when I moved house, I didn't update my records at my dentist. [I moved] about 15-16 years ago. If you don't do it, I think it's every 2 years or something, they automatically just strike you off don't they? I was under the impression that, if you don't keep updating your profile then, after two years you're off and then somebody else jumps in, in front of you, or takes your place.

I keep asking friends when they go, can you ask them if they've got any slots, you know, for me and my partner, she cracked her tooth during lockdown, the front one and she can't get in either. For me, I'm okay with it. It's just my partner, it's making her a little bit depressed to tell you the truth.

It's not [possible to access a dentist easily now, they need to] open more practices. Prime example, we used to have a doctors' surgery, only about 60 yards at the bottom of our street then the doctors left that and that was ideal for a dental practice, there's car parking, separate rooms...instead of thinking of, where we are now, there's like a catchment area of three housing estates...and it's a big catchment area but the council in their wisdom, no, we'll put flats there. Very disappointed in that. There is [a need for more dentists and more dentist facilities] without a doubt.

Geoff does not believe that the emergency dentist is something that he should access in his situation

I go in the chemist every month for my script, and there's a dental emergency number on the window but I don't think my situation is worthy of it, me taking somebody else's place because I can manage. [The service is for] if you've got toothache, or cracked teeth, or abscesses or whatever.

However, Geoff's wife, who has a cracked tooth and is not registered with an NHS dentist, would find it hard to access the emergency dentist

If she goes out, I've got to go out with her. I'm like a carer for her. She can't walk far, got a bad back and she's got a walking stick and a walk around trolley so the only place that she will go is Caerphilly, she won't go to Newport or Cardiff because of the travelling, it's got to be a bus for us too, I don't drive, so it's got to be buses.

Taking part in the research may have given Geoff a new impetus to try and access help

Probably go online, after now, have a look at dentists or the dental hospital in Cardiff, in the Heath, because the bus stops right outside it and then she won't have to walk far and I could take her down, and me at the same time if that's at all possible.

Name:	Helen
Age:	35-44
Health Board:	Swansea Bay University Health Board

Helen was left frustrated trying to contact the emergency dentist.

I called them in November because I thought I had an abscess. I was 92nd in the queue – it took me over an hour to get through. I was at work and thought it would just take five minutes. Then when I spoke to them they said they wanted a picture of the inside of my mouth. I thought it was a stupid request because it was just going to be dark, and I thought it was too complicated, so I didn't bother. It's been OK since, it just kind of disappeared. They didn't follow up and I just left it. I would have thought they would have at least seen me if I took a lateral flow test and had no Covid symptoms.

After developing a sensitive tooth during the pandemic, Helen has made some changes to her oral health routine until she can get a routine appointment.

I think I need a filling, which is causing some sensitivity, so I have changed to different toothpaste and a mouthwash. I don't eat chewy things like sweets and I can't eat ice cream because of the sharp pain.

I phoned the dentist, but they said they are not doing check-ups and they are only seeing you if it's an emergency at the moment, or as far as I know.

Helen's teenage son is becoming more conscious of his appearance and she is keen to get him to the dentist for a check-up.

I've been with my dentist about ten years. I did struggle to find one in my local area – it's not easy to find and NHS one, but once I did registering was fine. I have a 12-year-old-boy, who is also registered with the same dentist.

My son would normally go to check-ups with me every six months. He is nearly 13 so I've noticed in the last year he is more conscious about how his teeth look and his breath. He takes a lot more notice of his appearance. Before Covid he didn't really brush much because he didn't care, but I've noticed he takes a lot more notice about how he looks and how he presents himself.

He brushes more often now, especially now that he's lost all his milk teeth because he knows this is the last set of teeth he'll have.

He's been fine but has been having a few problems with teeth coming through. I would like him to go a dentist now because he's lost most of his milk teeth and I want to make sure they are all growing properly.

I think they should have sent out advice during the pandemic because not everyone knows how to maintain good health and gums.

Name:	John
Age:	65-74
Health Board:	Powys Teaching Health Board

John's teeth have worsened during the pandemic, but he was unable to get an appointment

My teeth have gradually got worse during the pandemic, and I've got a bit of pain now. I've asked for appointments, but they said they only do emergency appointments. I contacted them about two and a half months ago, they weren't going to give me an appointment, but I said that my teeth have got worse and worse, and that I can't put it off any longer. They said they only had an appointment two months later, which is now coming up, so I just had to take that appointment.

We all have problems with our teeth, but you expect them to be sorted when you have an issue, not having to wait around whilst they break, or waiting for a filling to fall out. I don't want to say I was fobbed off, but it just doesn't sit right.

He's now facing the prospect of having a lot of dental work done in one go, which could be very expensive

As you get older your teeth start to break down, and a couple of my teeth have broken, and one of my fillings has dropped out. Had I seen the dentist during the pandemic there wouldn't have been too much work, but my teeth have got worse. Now, I'll be getting all the treatment in one go, which is expensive because I need at least four fillings, and work to sort my broken teeth. Although my teeth would normally be in a reasonable state, they are now actually quite bad.

John would usually go to the dentist for advice, but he hasn't been able to visit the dentist

I think we all want to take pride in our teeth, we all want a nice smile, but to me, my teeth now look ugly. They seem to be wearing away at the front, and of course I haven't been able to get any advice from my dentist for two years. I wouldn't go online because you just don't know what to trust online. Online is the last place to look, you can get all sorts of advice on there and you don't know whether it's true. I've wanted to go to the dentist, including to get advice on my teeth, but they just haven't been accepting patients.

John brushes his teeth just once a day, but feels he looks after his teeth

We had our appointments every six months [before the pandemic]. I've always brushed my teeth once a day and used mouthwash two or three times a week. I don't smoke, I don't drink alcohol. I drink tea and coffee, maybe the odd lemonade. I don't know if tea or coffee corrode the teeth, but I know that lemonade does so I don't have it often.

However, he has a lot of fillings from his younger days

My teeth when I was younger got really bad, but I've looked after my teeth since. When I was about twenty, I moved from the north east of England to Bristol, and I needed fourteen fillings. I was quite shocked. I didn't know what a dentist was at that time! I didn't know about oral health until I got the shock when I visited the dentists and needed all those fillings!

Name:	Josh
Age:	25-34
Health Board:	Cardiff and Vale Health Board

Josh moved house before the pandemic, and since then, has been unable to register with a dentist

We moved house in November 2019, just before the pandemic. When we moved, I looked for the nearest dentists on Google Maps, and asked a few if they were accepting NHS patients. I called a few but only one would accept me. They said they wouldn't register us until we'd booked our first appointment. But then the pandemic hit, and we've never gotten around to booking an appointment, so we're not actually registered.

During the pandemic we never had a routine appointment, but I don't even know if they offered those appointments. They were probably busy with urgent appointments, and I don't enjoy going to the dentists anyway. I called the dentist this week and asked if they are accepting NHS patients, but they said they aren't now. They gave me a number though for the health board.

He had a good oral health routine before the pandemic, but he avoided going to the dentist because of the cost

Before the pandemic I'd brush my teeth twice a day. I would floss twice a week and use mouth wash after flossing. I would say I was like everyone else, my motivation to look after my teeth was normal. I'd go for a check-up once a year or once every two years.

My main reason for not visiting the dentist isn't fear, but cost. When you're a child it's free or your parents will cover it, but when you're an adult you have to pay, and it feels like it costs more than it should. I sometimes feel some pain, but because of the cost I would hold off. If I had more money, then I'd probably go to the dentist as soon as there's pain. It bothers me a little bit, but luckily, I haven't had too much pain yet.

During the pandemic, however, his oral health routine became a bit slack

During the pandemic, my oral health has got worse. I snack more because of boredom and the pandemic has affected my moods more. And also, we weren't allowed to go out, so I got lazy brushing my teeth. Usually, if I went out to meet someone then I'd brush my teeth, but I wasn't meeting people so there wasn't as much need to brush my teeth. I was also feeling quite lethargic from not been able to do anything, so I'd often go to bed without brushing my teeth.

I suppose working from home, and because I didn't have to go into work, I'd wake up later than normal, and so I didn't always have time to brush my teeth in the morning, and then sometimes I got a bit lazy in the evenings too, so I wouldn't do my teeth in the evenings either.

Josh doesn't feel as if he's missed going to the dentist, and may not go as often in the future

The pandemic has definitely made me lazier about my oral health. But I haven't had any check-ups during the pandemic, and I feel fine, and they are expensive anyway, so I don't feel as if there's a need to go as often. I'm not in any rush to go to the dentist. [I would go] if I had some pain that wasn't going away for a week or two.

Josh's daughter needs to visit the dentist, but he's unsure if dentists are accepting appointments

My daughter's oral health has been fine though, my wife is very diligent about looking after our girls' teeth. She had a chipped tooth though, but because it wasn't urgent, I didn't feel it was urgent enough to go to the dentist for during a pandemic. If there wasn't a pandemic, then I probably would have gone to see the dentists about it. We still haven't gone to the dentists about it, I didn't think we could yet.

Name:	Karen
Age:	55-64
Health Board: Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board	

Lockdown, Covid-19 and a dental practice take-over saw Karen boost her oral health routine to keep her mouth healthy.

I have always been strict – I had a real routine, brushing morning and evening for at least two minutes using pro-enamel toothpaste because I have thin enamel and sensitivity. I flossed regularly as I get food trapped in between as my teeth are cramped.

During Covid, the dentist I was originally with retired, and the business was sold to other dentists, but they kept the NHS patients. It was closed for a while because they modernised it and spent a fair bit of money on it during the pandemic.

I was more conscious that I wasn't being checked as much. I flossed more because I wasn't having my annual scrape and polish, especially behind my bottom front teeth, where I would notice a build-up of plaque. I also became conscious of healthy eating as I've been quite ill with Covid and needed to eat more healthily as I was on steroids for seven or eight months and gained weight. We grow our veg - I have a greenhouse and veg patch and we do eat healthily.

I certainly cut back on alcohol – partly because I was on so much medication and was really ill, and also because I wasn't having my check-ups as the dentist was closed on the most part for two years. And I use mouthwash more than I used to – I was on antibiotics for quite a long time and had Covid so lost my sense of taste, and I didn't know if my I had unpleasant breath.

Although regular check-ups were placed on hold during the pandemic, Karen was quick to sort out a new crown when she got back into the dentist chair.

I had a crown when I was six years old, just after I got my second set of teeth. We were putting away our chairs at school and this boy ran at me – the chair hit the front of my tooth and it shattered. I spent about a year and a half going back to the hospital and having that treated. I had a temporary crown – it was horrible, and I hated it.

I had it replaced in my twenties because I was self-conscious. It was not in great shape, and I wanted a nicer one. It was on the NHS, but I still had to pay. It cost just over £300 and lasted over 30 years.

I wasn't seen for my regular check up until July 2021, which was about two years after the last one. I had a scrape and polish and he said to me the crown needed replacing. I knew it did because I was getting food getting trapped behind it. I was scared it was going to come off because it kept feeling loose. I knew it was time to get it done. It was fairly easy to get an appointment to have that done when they were open and set up.

Conscious of yellowing teeth, Karen also decided to have her teeth bleached after a suggestion from her dentist.

Because they were already taking an impression of my teeth, they offered a gum shield for teeth whitening, which I did. I'm nearly 60 so my teeth are yellowing a bit. I think I fell for it a bit as my son's wedding is coming up and I have been very aware that my teeth were yellowing. But my predominant reason for going was to get my crown fixed and when he told me how much it was going to be I nearly fell through the roof!

Name:	Leah
Age:	35-44
Health Board:	Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board

Leah lost her place with the dentist a few years ago

I didn't go to the dentist very often before the pandemic. I used to miss appointments and if you miss too many they strike you off, so I ended up without one. But I didn't have any problems, pain or bleeding. None of us were registered then.

She was aware of the mistake she made, so sought to rectify the situation after moving house

When we moved two to three years ago, we decided to sign up for the children (aged 10 and 14) mostly. It's important to make sure they had a dentist and if they needed treatment then they would have somewhere to go. I just stuck a search on Google "NHS dentist near me" and rang the first one. They had space so I signed all four of us up. The fact that we all had our first appointment as a family helped.

I want to be a good role model for the kids, it's important to look after your teeth. They're terrible with brushing their teeth. The youngest will when he remembers, but the older one procrastinates.

Her son required braces, but the pandemic has delayed this course of treatment

My son (14) was told that he probably needs braces, and they were going to put the referral through but then Covid happened, and we haven't heard anything. We'll chase it up when normal appointments come back. He's a bit nervous about it because he has ADHD and possible autism, things like that he finds a bit unnerving but as long you explain things to him and reassure him then he's usually quite good.

Leah was impressed with the care she received from the emergency dentist during the pandemic

I had a toothache towards the end of last year and rang for an emergency appointment at my dentist. I got straight through and explained, then they gave me an appointment the next day. I went down and they had a look. They said they could either do a root canal or take it out completely. I didn't like the thought of a root canal and it was in a place where no one would see it, so it wouldn't affect my smile, so I told them to take it out.

They were really good and completely put me at ease. When I was waiting for the injection to take effect, we bonded over Harry Potter. It was very friendly and relaxed, and she explained everything as she was doing it. She gave me a leaflet on aftercare and told me to let them know if there any problems and they would see me straight away, fair play. The service I received was amazing.

Although Leah has made some positive changes, she knows she needs to do better

We haven't really changed what we did before the pandemic, although last April I had a very mild stroke which scared me a bit and caused me to quit smoking and I'm now vaping.

I only brush once a day, but I've tried to get into the habit of doing it twice a day. I always brush in the evening no matter what, but I don't know how I got out of the habit of doing it in the morning. I don't floss, but I sometimes use mouthwash if I have any problems. I used to only go to the dentist if I had a problem, but I will keep up with regular check-ups now.

Name:	Liz
Age:	45-54
Health Board: Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board	

Liz's son, who has additional needs, attends a community dentist which provides a service with which Liz is very happy with

I have five children. My eldest is 31. He has special needs. He has uncontrolled epilepsy, is partially sighted, has learning disabilities, and has mobility issues. He doesn't see our dentist; he sees a dentist in a health practice who specialises in learning disabilities. I'm happier with her than I am with my own dentist. I think she's got more time in the community dentist. She talks to you more, she's more friendly, and you're seeing the same dentist.

During the pandemic, they've been brilliant, they've been seeing Simon every three months because he's on the waiting list to have a tooth removed. He's been on that waiting list for about four years. He has epilepsy but it's uncontrolled, and he has no warnings, so it's not safe for them to put him under or whatever they do, so they don't do that in the community dentist.

She would have a chat with Simon, make him feel comfortable and not so nervous. So as far as Simon was concerned, everything was exactly the same really. He understands we're going to the dentist. He knows the dentist is going to look in his mouth. But when it comes to what she is doing, he has no idea at all.

During the pandemic, Liz had to visit their regular dental practice

My youngest daughter went to the dentist as an emergency roughly four months ago. She found a tiny, tiny little hole in her front tooth on the gum line as she was brushing, so we went just to get that checked out. We phoned up, I think it was on the Monday, and were seen the following Tuesday. They were wonderful.

"We had to stand outside, for them to come and let us in, they came and done a questionnaire, then we had to stay outside then until the dentist upstairs was ready, hand sanitising on the way in, trying not to touch anything walking up the stairs, seeing the dentist, masks on, and then just straight back down and straight out. It was just straight in, up, done and out.

It [Covid-19 precautions] had to be done. It wasn't very welcoming. It wasn't very friendly. But, glad that they've done it that way because then at least I know that they are following regulations, they're following the rules.

Liz has improved her oral health since having children and encouraged her (now adult) children to do the same

When I was younger, it was awful, never brushed my teeth when I was growing up, but after I've had Simon, it's a lot better than it was. It was just something that we were never encouraged to do at home. The school dentist would come to the school, and they'd give you a small tube of toothpaste and a little toothbrush and that was it.

I didn't see a dentist at all, and obviously because I didn't brush my teeth, my teeth were awful. For years and years, I had a gum boil. I was in agony and it would come and go. I think because of that, one of my teeth rotted so they had to rebuild it. Then they couldn't rebuild it, so they put a gold tooth in place of it. So I think that, and the pain I was going through, has definitely made me more conscious of taking care of my teeth.

I've also encouraged good oral health in my children. That's something, since they were babies, they had their own little toothbrush with a little tiny spot of toothpaste, and they would brush their teeth so that's something they've always done.

However, Liz feels that her teeth have become worse during the pandemic

[I feel] a little anxious [that I've not been to the dentist for two years]. I feel as if my mouth isn't clean, even though I'm brushing my teeth twice a day and making sure that I'm trying to get rid of the stains, it just doesn't seem as if I've done enough. And because they don't look as clean as they would normally if I've been to the dentist, and I've had a check-up and they do a quick polish.

I get a tartar build up, so I've paid more attention to that area because, obviously, I can't get that done in the dentist. And, if I'm honest, after two and a half years since we've been last, the tarter did build up. So, I used a sewing pick on my bottom teeth just to try and scrape some of the tartar away. [It worked but] I'm just glad that it didn't slip, and I didn't damage my gums or anything.

She felt there should have been more support and information on oral health during the pandemic

When we hit the pandemic, there was nothing publicised about what to do for your teeth or, you know, somebody who had lots of ulcers, surely that's not good, or if they had bleeding gums, there was nothing publicised what to do for that.

Name:	Margaret
Age:	45-54
Health Board:	Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

Margaret has oral health issues that make her feel self-conscious and negatively affect her mental wellbeing

I need a dentist. I have bleeding gums which bleed at night, and I have a lot of teeth that are broken at the back that need sorting out as well. I worry in case my breath smells or whatever because I work in retail as well. And having broken teeth, obviously the food gets in there and it's not pleasant then is it? The back ones are like chipped and broken and they can be sharp when they chip. I'd say it has deteriorated slightly [during Covid].

I'm with a new partner now and it makes me so self-conscious because my gums are bleeding at night, and I can't hide that fact in the morning when there's blood on my pillow. And I'm always self-conscious in case my breath is bad because I do have bad teeth at the back where they've crumbled. You are aware of it; you don't want to stand by anybody too close just in case your breath is a bit whiffy. I talk to [my partner] about it. I feel I have to because I feel like I have to explain myself, if you know what I mean, because otherwise I'd feel embarrassed.

Despite her oral health issues, Margaret is unable to access an NHS dentist

I eventually got [an NHS dentist] a few years ago in Bangor, but before I got a chance to go and see him that one closed as well. I haven't got a dentist now which I do need at my age. I never felt the need to have one and then when I needed one there was none available.

A lot of people say the same. My son has tried as well. He's very conscious of his teeth. He's got lovely white teeth but he has broken ones at the back as well. He's been in a lot of pain the last few weeks with wisdom teeth as well.

I have looked on the NHS online, and they kind of give you a list sometimes, don't they, of where there's some available but it always says none available. I think there's just going to be a lot of people with a lot of problems in a few years to come, I mean they've got problems with oral health now, it's going to be even worse in a few years because people just can't get into dentists. I think there should be more NHS dentists, I think there should be a lot more to give people the opportunity to go.

Margaret does not believe she can use the emergency dentist

I have looked at [using emergency dentist] before but it says only to phone if you're in pain, if you're in a lot of pain, which I'm not. It's useful for people that are in pain, like with abscesses, and that need emergency dental treatment, but it's no good to people that need day to day treatment you know, like with bleeding gums and things like that, what can I do about it other than sort it myself?

[Also] we've had no way of getting there, I think the nearest one from Bangor is Llanfair PG and we've got no way of getting there.

Her oral health issues began when she was a child

[I didn't go to a dentist as a child] not that I can remember, only to the school dentist. I didn't brush my teeth much when I was younger. I was probably just lazy as kids are.

My first visit to the dentist was when I was about 14/15 when I had an abscess on my tooth. And that frightened the life out of me, and I didn't go back for a long, long time. I was just nervous, and my mother didn't help because she was nervous as well.

Margaret relies on trying to treat her oral health issues at home, using commercially available mouthwash

I get the Corsodyl mouthwash and toothpaste to try and sort it out. I have tried that a few times, and it does work, but I don't like using it continuously because I don't know what effect it will have on my teeth in the long run, so I try and give it a break and then go back onto it then after a while.

Margaret tends to get her information about oral health from the television and internet

[I get information about oral health] mostly on the telly when you're watching it, that's where I've seen about the Corsodyl. You see a lot on the internet as well, what causes bleeding gums and then that, is it gingivitis or something? Just like adverts and things you know, like when you're scrolling through Facebook or whatever, and these adverts pop up.

Sometimes I would [actively look for information] if I was worried about something I'd search it and have a look. I don't trust a lot of websites, because like they say, Dr Google...when you consult Dr Google he could be telling you that you're dying, I read it but don't take it too much to heart and, take it a bit lightly. I'd look through a few different ones [websites] and if it came up with the same kind of thing then maybe I would take it.

There's nowhere that you can get [oral health information] only on the internet really to be fair. Because you can't phone up a dentist and ask because they wouldn't have the time to give it to you anyway. So, I'd just say the internet.

Margaret also said that school dentists should be brought back, which was the only source of oral hygiene intervention she remembered having when she was very young

[I didn't go to a dentist as a child] not that I can remember, only to the school dentist. I think it would be great if they brought the school dentists back into the schools and to teach the children again about oral hygiene because a lot of children from poorer families they don't get the opportunities that a lot of other children get. I remember when I was in school, I used to love getting the toothbrushes and the toothpaste off the school dentists and I think that would be a great idea if they brought them back again to the schools.

Name:	Nadine
Age:	55-64
Health Board:	Swansea Bay University Health Board

Nadine has been without a dentist for two years

I was registered with a dentist in Weston Super Mare and then I moved to Wales. It would be 2 years in June. But because of the pandemic, I wasn't able to get to a dentist because they weren't seeing anybody.

She hasn't tried to find a dentist yet, as she assumes they haven't fully re-opened

I need to find a dentist as soon as they're seeing people again. I haven't really [tried to register with a dentist] because I assumed they weren't seeing anybody. I think the doctors have only just started seeing people. So we knew we wouldn't have a chance at the dentist, so we are waiting until they open up again and things are back to normal.

Getting an NHS dentist is a priority, but she feels this may not be possible

Preferably NHS because I was private, and it was so expensive. I couldn't get into an NHS dentist in Western Super Mare because they were all full.

Nadine has a mixed record of visiting the dentist

Before the pandemic I didn't go regularly but I did go at least once a year to see a hygienist and if I needed work done. I've had a history of problems with my teeth, going back to when I was twenty, I've had caps on my front teeth because I chipped them. I then broke my caps so had to have a bridge made.

I had the bridge for about twenty years. I was very happy with it and then I hit my face on the pavement and the bridge broke. Ever since then I've had endless problems. They couldn't re-build the bridge because I'd weakened one of the posts, so I had to have a denture with the first front four teeth on it. That took forever to do and ended up being disastrous. Then I had to go private and got a metal plate done in Western Super Mare. I got that done not long before the pandemic started.

She needs to visit the dentist, but can't go until they fully re-open, and until she can afford it

I need to go again because I'm not happy with the colour match and it's become loose. It rattles and it makes me feel sick. I can't do that until they're open and until we can afford it.

It's been horrendous during the pandemic, not only not being able to see somebody but also the anticipation of the bill. I'd rather have the pain than the bill. [I would like to go to the dentist] within the next few weeks hopefully. But what's holding me back is the financial side because it's so expensive to go to the dentist, it's not affordable at all.

Since the pandemic things have been difficult money wise, so getting an NHS dentist is a priority.

Name:	Nerys
Age:	65-74
Health Board:	Powys THB

Nerys has had bad experiences of dentists in the past, and it is only recently that she has found a practice where she trusts the staff

All my life I've had a bad experience everywhere I've been to the dentist, I've had one bad experience after another...I had a tooth out with a dentist surgery...where I live and that come all infected because he was poking about you know, in the gum and that was all infected. Then I had a scale with another dentist and my gums were all sore and bleeding, red, bad experience there.

I had a dentist in my home town, but I had very bad experiences from them. They took a tooth out and I could feel them pull the tooth out and I was coming out of the chair, and I had to take pain relief in the surgery.

That was years ago. So I've changed to a different dentist which is twenty miles away and they're very good dentists, you know. And I explained the situation to him, that I felt that tooth coming out, and he said I shouldn't have felt nothing when it came out. She gave me two injections and then another tooth had to come out the other side. He's given me three and I had no problem at all, didn't feel the tooth coming out. And he said that's how it should be, you shouldn't be able to feel your tooth coming out.

I'd heard someone said that these dentists were good and they especially treat you better when you're a bit nervous of the dentist. There's a very young girl there and she was marvellous. I felt nothing...I'm just petrified of dentists anyway, but I'm fine with this one....they talk to you and calm you down, they say this won't hurt and, they send you into the waiting room for the stuff to take effect, then call you back in twenty minutes later. The dentist I went to [before] didn't take me out of the room, she just started straight away, the treatment.

Nerys has had issues with her oral health, particularly with her dentures. While some of this was down to her own behaviour, it has taken longer to access NHS treatment since the pandemic

I had a lot of infection in my gum and I think it was to do with hygiene, I wasn't keeping up with my hygiene for my dentures. I was sleeping in them, and you're not supposed to, you're supposed to take them out... I should have taken them out... I just can't be bothered, I'm lost without my teeth, I know I've got to take them out at night...and I bought some Corsodyl mouthwash which is fantastic, then I brought some Steradent tablets and I soak them every night now and I've had no problems since... I've started taking them out now at night.

I've got a top denture and I broke my bottom denture and I can't get to see a dentist at the moment, until May. So I've got to have a new denture made. I broke them months ago now, about three months ago...we superglued it and it's just so uncomfortable I can't wear it. It's worked but it's rubbing against my gums when I put them in so I can't use them.

I've got to go back and forth to the dentist now for weeks on end, you know, to have a fitting, and something else done, and then the dentures are made, it's going to take me weeks to get a new denture...they tried to get me in earlier, and they rang me and said the dentist is not very well, you can't come, so they made another appointment for me, then they cancelled it again, they said the dentist is ill, you can't come. And this is my third appointment now, and hopefully in May I can get to see the dentist...it will be nearly three months to try and see a dentist now... [Before Covid it would have taken] a week, two weeks. I think part of it's cos they're trying to catch up with the customers she said, and they've got a backlog so it's a longer time to wait now. And they've got one dentist off sick.

I'm just managing, I've got to watch what I eat because I can only bite so many things and chew so much food, you know. My bottom denture, I used to bite it and I can't use it at the moment so it's all soft food really. I brush my teeth and I soak them in Steradent every night and I use mouthwash as well...I use [Corsodyl] when I've got infections.

Luckily I'm still on the books because they extended it. I think it's about a year and if you don't go they take you off, you've got to go once a year just for a check-up, whether you've got any teeth or false teeth or what, just to check that you haven't got mouth cancer. And because of the Covid, it went on for two years nearly, they allowed an extra year so I just got in.

Nerys found NHS emergency dental provision to be unsatisfactory

You'd have to phone the NHS line and you could go and have a one-off treatment and that was it, but if you were in pain, they took your tooth out, that's all I knew. [I know this] cos I had to ring the dentist, or a line, for my partner, and I think he went and had a tooth out. It was a one off, you can't go again....he had to wear a mask I think, that's all.

A friend of mine was in agony with toothache and had to wait seven weeks to see a dentist...took painkillers and eventually she got an appointment at the hospital and had to have three teeth out. She was in weeks of pain.

The NHS, they should put things online and tell people that they can see emergency dentists, there's a certain number you ring for emergency dentists, they should do all that, put everything online and people can access then. Makes people aware that they can get in contact with them.

GP prescription of antibiotics appears to be being used in lieu of accessing proper and appropriate dental care

[My partner is] scared to go to the dentist as well, he's got toothache and abscesses, his face swells and he will not go to the dentist. He just gets antibiotics off the doctor but it's a problem that's going to keep coming back and he won't go...But the doctor's really helpful, they'll give you antibiotics if you can't see a dentist, they'll give you a prescription if you've got toothache and stuff, or infections.

Name:	Phillipa
Age:	45-54
Health Board:	Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

Philippa's dental practice has changed a lot in the last few years, but luckily, she is still registered

I was registered with a dentist and then the practice closed down. When I heard that this dentist was closing down, I did get a number for another NHS dentist in Penrhyneddraeth which is really far away and there was not chance I'd get there because I don't drive.

But they've been taken over now. Luckily for me they [the new dental practice] do take some NHS patients, but their prices have gone up. Luckily for me they've kept their patients.

As a result of these changes, and the pandemic, she hasn't been to the dentist in a few years

I haven't been for about 3 and a half years, but I've just managed to get an appointment for May. I just called them up and they told me that they don't do check-ups until May, so she's just put my name down ready for when they start.

Nevertheless, she wouldn't have visited the dentist due to fear of catching Covid-19

[If I'd been offered a check-up in the last two years] I would have been scared, I don't think I would have gone because of Covid, sitting there with my mouth open, I wouldn't have felt comfortable. Everybody was a little scared and I think they only would have seen me if I had a particularly bad problem. I would have gone then.

Phillipa has to go to the dentist now, due to an oral health issue

I have to go now because of this crown issue. The tooth has been painful through Covid, but I didn't really want to go then. I feel comfortable going to the dentist now things are easing up.

The cost of dental care has put Phillipa off from visiting the dentist more often

I have gum diseases. The dentist has told me that it's because I smoke. But my sister has it as well, so I think it's a family trait. I used to go regularly to the dentist and then go to the hygienist and have a scale and polish, but I'd have to pay for that which was around £40. They've told me now in the new practice that if I want to see the hygienist that it's going to cost around £60.

I am having trouble with one of my teeth, there's a filling in one of the ones in the back and every time I have a scale and polish, it falls out. Last time he told me I need to have a crown, privately it's around £1,000, £250 on the NHS.

I'd be depressed if I didn't have an NHS dentist, the thought of having to pay so much. How is somebody that works on minimum wage supposed to pay for a private dentist? If I didn't have an NHS dentist I'd have to save for months or get a credit card out to pay for it. I'm so lucky that I have an NHS dentist still. Where I work they have a dental insurance

scheme and I'm thinking of taking that so it can cover costs for a crown, and because NHS prices have generally gone up.

Her boyfriend needs to visit the dentist, but is not registered

My boyfriend doesn't have a dentist, he constantly complains about his teeth, but he hasn't looked for a dentist. He just swallows paracetamol when he has tooth ache. There's no space at my dentist at the moment.

Name:	Robert
Age:	55-64
Health Board:	Hywel Dda University Health Board

Robert was without a dentist for years, until recently. However his new dentist is quite far away

I moved to Pembrokeshire in the early '90s and there were no NHS dentists. I only had access to emergency 101 for years if I needed something. Then, about four years ago I put myself on the list for a dentist. I think there may have been something on the TV about them changing the rules and saying dentists are taking on NHS patients, so I thought I'd get on the list while I had a chance. I was lucky, it was quite quick to get on, but it's about a 40-mile round trip to get to the dentist.

He has some damaged teeth, as a result of having no dentist for years

I think some of the damage in my teeth was from when I moved down here in 1992, and the lack of NHS dentists was bad. It's improved a lot since then and I'm reasonably confident I'd get an appointment if I needed.

I have enough teeth for my normal day-to-day things, but I have lost teeth from when I had fillings in the '80s and '90s. I think they did too much, and the fillings are breaking down and some of the teeth are cracking. It's been happening for years, and I had some teeth refilled between 2006 and 2014.

Robert has renewed confidence in the dentist

We were getting check-ups before the pandemic. They do a good service. I had an appointment in July for a routine check-up and had no problems other than wear and tear. While I've got the base of my teeth, they don't need to come out and I can still chew with them, so the dentist just said to keep brushing.

Cutting down on crunchy foods and a regular brushing routine is helping Robert maintain his teeth

I brush twice a day every day. I don't like flossing because sometimes it angers my gums. But I do use a toothpick to dig out a bit if something gets stuck. And I have cut back on nuts and excessively crunchy food to look after my teeth so I can keep them as long as I can.

Name:	Vivian
Age:	65-74
Health Board:	Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

A dentist buy-out left one family without a dentist just as Covid struck, but after eight attempts they found a private practice that has added them to the waiting list

Our dentist retired just before the pandemic, so we were left without one. Because of lockdown, we didn't do anything about getting a dentist and had decided to wait until normality returned, but then we had to find one because my wife had a problem. We went around the local ones that we knew existed and just stuck our head around the door of seven or eight dentists to ask if they were taking on patients, but when they drew a blank it was back to a google search of ones we weren't aware of.

We found one that is only five minutes down the road on an industrial estate and they said they would put us on the waiting list. As part of being on the waiting list, although we don't get routine check-ups, should one of us have a problem they will get you in for an appointment, which is what happened with my wife, and she was seen within 24 hours of calling them.

Her issue still hasn't been resolved – there is a growth just inside her mouth, which I believe she initially saw the doctor about. The doctor said to see the dentist, then the dentist referred her to the hospital, and now she's waiting to hear from the hospital.

Vivian finds huge value in finding a good dentist after previous bad experiences put him off visiting

I've had some bad experiences in the past and have a bit of a fear there and do get wary. Twenty years ago we had the same issue with not being able to register anywhere. I had a problem and finding a dentist who would do something was a nightmare. In the end I had an hour's drive to the dentist and had some treatment – fillings or something – and was trying to get home, but as the injections were wearing off the pain was worse than what I went for. It was horrendous.

I had to go to another dentist to get it sorted. That dentist ended up being the one that retired. I had a lot of treatment with him, so it was a big disappointment when he decided to retire. Fortunately, I've had no dental problems since. I don't like the dentist and if I'm being honest, the only time I'd want to go is when I have a problem, although we used to go as a family for our six-monthly check-up in order to stay on his books because he was a good dentist and I wanted to keep him.

Vivian's teenage daughter is starting to take more care of her appearance

I still brush twice a day. Getting my daughter to look after her teeth has always been a bit of a battle. But she is much better now – maybe because she's a teenager and socialises more, generally she will look after herself more. I think it's more of an age thing, it didn't seem important to her before, but it does now.

He has had some pain in his gums, but doesn't feel he needs to visit the dentist

I started using a mouthwash because I've been getting pain in my mouth where there's no tooth. I bought an antiseptic mouthwash to get rid of it, and it's been keeping it at bay. I will go to the dentist if it gets bad – if it started really stabbing me I'd be straight down the dentist. Had it been a tooth I would probably have gone to the dentist, but as there is no tooth there I think maybe it's a bit of nerve or something. The antiseptic mouthwash keeps it at bay.

Unfortunately, Vivian expects to be on the waiting list for some time yet

In terms of how long we'll be on the waiting list, it's a case of 'how long is a piece of string'. I think probably in excess of a year. Because I don't like the dentist it doesn't bother me, but I think tooth pain is the worst pain that you can suffer and that is only one cure – the dentist. I'm glad we've found one, so they will see us if we have a problem. If we're on the waiting list for ages, we'll get in contact with them and see what they say. Depending on their response, we might sit it out or look for another one.

Vivian can't understand why dentistry is not included more fully in the NHS

I've never understood why dentistry isn't part of the NHS. To me, it should be part-and-parcel of the treatment that we all need. I should probably get a politician to explain that to me. There certainly aren't enough NHS dentists, anyway. When we were looking, I don't think we found an NHS one. We found a couple that do NHS and private.

Name:	Yomi
Age:	25-34
Health Board:	Cardiff and Vale Health Board

It took Yomi a while to find an NHS dentist when they moved, and the only one she could find was in an inconvenient location

It did take me a while to find one, there's an NHS Direct number that you need to call so I had to call that number and they gave me available ones that I could join but there was none actually until I found one in Pentwyn, and I live in Ely, so it's quite far but that was the only one I could get... It's quite a distance...to find one, to get registered, took me about three to four months.

I had an emergency, well I call it an emergency but I had mouth problems, I needed to see the dentist and my son also had problems. We actually moved from Pentrych, we used to have like a community dentist in Pentrych, so moving from Pentrych we needed to get a new dentist and I kept trying to find one but I couldn't get one but when I knew that I needed, like I really, really needed one, so I had to look for that one, for the one in Pentwyn.

We all went to the community dentist [before moving]...it was really good because, you know, it was guaranteed that they would see us routinely anyway, every six months and if we had an emergency it was quite easy to call them and just go down. But the one in Cardiff, the dentist in Cardiff, I've never even seen them yet, I've not even seen them and that's really, I don't know why.

Yomi has struggled to access NHS care during the pandemic, despite being pregnant, which led to her taking painkillers regularly, and eventually resorting to private dental treatment to deal with ongoing pain

I've been registered to a dentist now, for the past three years... but it's been quite difficult to see them since the beginning of the pandemic. Before the pandemic I had an appointment...and they had to cancel it and since then I've been struggling to get any appointment from them...the appointment was back in 2020, March. Back in June they then sent a message to say that they were sorry it was cancelled, and then I did try to book another appointment in June but it was cancelled again...it just said unfortunately we have to cancel your family appointment so that was it. I have tried to contact them. But they don't have any available space to see us...they gave me a date to call them, I think that was like about four months after but I really, really needed [to be seen], so I had to go private.

I think one time [during the pandemic] they did offer to do like a video call or something and we did arrange it and I did speak to someone but it wasn't what I wanted, and I really needed them to see... what I wanted them to see, my teeth is having holes and I needed that to be filled up I know, I was really in pain, you know but, yeah, they didn't really say anything, I think that was one of the reasons I ignored them because they were not as good as I thought they should be, yeah.

[I was in pain throughout the pandemic], I was actually just managing on paracetamol...regularly. I did [try the emergency dentist] one time...I remember, I think I was in town when I made that call and they were like oh they will only see you if you are really extreme pain or you are bleeding from your mouth or something like that and they then give me numbers to like call, like NHS dentists and all that but that didn't really work, I can remember because I was in serious pain in town when I made that call... I was in extreme pain and I'm pregnant and they just said - the funny thing, I was so angry I can remember this vividly - she was like if you're in pain, someone else would be doing the talking for you and I told the person that, I have like high threshold for pain, even if I'm in pain I can still like express myself or do whatever I want to do but I really, really needed them to see me. I ended up going private, I was like, I'm done with all this...they don't think that I'm in so much pain like that, I remember the lady telling me that...I can remember this because I know how much pain I was in...I don't know [how she knew], she can't see me over the phone.

And I remember I actually went private, I went to see a dentist in Cardiff Bay... that sorted it out...I saw them quite quickly. My son Charles did have holes in his teeth and I was just checking and I was like, Charles you have holes in them and he said oh yeah Mum, I'm actually in pain as well and that was one of the reasons why I actually booked the appointment in the first place with my dentist...I did it for the both of us, we all just went private because we just couldn't take it any more, we all decided to go private.

I was really angry, I was not happy at all, I was not, because I had to take money out of savings, and during the pandemic, if we had gone through the NHS dentist I wouldn't have paid the amount I paid for sorting out teeth. At least, my kids ones would have been free,

even if mine is not free because I'm not on benefit I'm working full time, so at least I would have been able to save on my teeth fees other than paying all that money just to get our teeth sorted.

Yomi is worried about her children's oral health, despite trying to instil good oral health behaviour in them

I've always had good oral health. What I normally do is I just brush twice a day, morning and night before bed. That's what my kids, that's what they do as well.

I've got two older boys and that is a struggle, I'm always standing there, Cameron and Charles go and sort your teeth out, especially my son Cameron, he has plaque now and he's only eight. That worries me because I remember I did a video of him when he was five years old and I was like 'Cameron, do you want your teeth to be disgusting if you don't brush?' I actually showed him that video and he was like 'Oh Mum, I know my teeth is...disgusting because you're always telling me to brush and I don't brush properly'. Whenever you want to brush with it and they will start screaming 'Oh Mum it's painful and I don't want to brush', I know that but I made sure that they tried to brush twice a day. It actually worries me, because why would it hurt them when they brush? It shouldn't be painful when you brush. So that was another thing I'm going to try and get an appointment for so that the dentist can see them and also for my first son's teeth because of the plaque, I want that removed, I'm worried about that.

5. Appendix: Demographics

The tables below illustrate the demographic profile of the participants. In addition to the below, we also sought to recruit people with children of different ages, and people who have long-term health conditions.

Similarly, we also recruited people with different levels of access to dental care, for example, those who are 'registered' with an NHS practice, and those who are not. We also sought a mix of people who have visited the dentist during the pandemic, and those who have not.

Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation	No.
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Lives in the 10% most deprived areas of Wales	14
Lives in the 10-20% most deprived areas of Wales	6

Total 20

Health board	No.
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Aneurin Bevan	1
Betsi Cadwaladr	5
Cardiff and Vale	3
Cwm Taf	4
Hywel Dda	2
Powys Teaching	2
Swansea Bay	3
Total	20

Age	No.
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18-34	3
35-44	6
45-54	3
55-64	4
65+	4
Total	20

Gender	No.
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Male	7
Female	13
Total	20

Ethnicity	No.
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White British	15
White Other	1
Black or Black British	1
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	1
Asian or Asian British	2
Total	20