

The Blackpool Better Start Partnership's Oral Health Improvement Plan is committed to addressing the oral health inequalities in Blackpool and improving the oral health of our youngest children and their families.

Dental health impacts a child's quality of life and well-being, and affects their ability to learn, thrive and develop. It is an indicator of parental sensitivity which is a parent's ability to notice and correctly interpret their child's signals or needs, and provide contingent, appropriate, and consistent responses to these signals or needs (Ainsworth et al., 1974).

Despite tooth decay being totally preventable, in 2019/20 a quarter of five-year-olds in England had tooth decay affecting three or four teeth.

During the pandemic there was a lack of access to dental services, and this has resulted in a significant backlog both nationally and locally. Routine dentistry was suspended from March – June 2020 and capacity was greatly reduced until July 2022 due to nationally imposed Infection Prevention and Control measures.

Access to an NHS dentist has been one of the most significant issues raised with Healthwatch by the public over the last 18 months. Not only has there been a large increase in the volume of feedback and negative sentiment, but there has also been a continuation of this new trend over time.



Understanding the Local Issues

There is clear and consistent evidence that inequalities in social economic position and area deprivation affects the prevalence of dental conditions and the impact of poor oral health and service use (PHE, 2021). In Blackpool 20% of three-year-olds are affected by visually obvious tooth decay, compared to 11% nationally. For Blackpool five-year-olds, this rises to a third, which again is higher than the national average.

Tooth decay is the most common reason for hospital admissions in children aged six to 10 years. In 2019/20, 79% of Blackpool children admitted for tooth extraction were under the age of 11, and 32% were under five years old. Again, this is higher than the national average.

In 2021, NHS Dental Statistics data shows that only 29% of Blackpool's children have seen an NHS dentist in the previous 12 months compared to 43% across England. In addition to a lack of access to dentists, families can also face social barriers that include location, cost, and fear.

Healthwatch Blackpool received over 70 calls in 2020/21 about accessing a dentist. A report found that of the 11 dental practices they called in Blackpool:

- All stated they were not currently accepting new NHS patients.
- 73% stated they were carrying out routine appointments for registered patients only, but 38% of these were prioritising emergency care or offering a limited service.
- There was inconsistent advice about how to access NHS dentistry and a lack of awareness from public and professionals of where people should go to address these issues.

How we tackled the issues

Our strategy employed to address oral health inequalities in Blackpool focusses predominantly on behaviour change and the prevention of poor oral health. It includes:

- Distribution of toothpaste and toothbrushes through health visitor checks. These packs are used as a tool to discuss oral health and reinforce key messages.
- Distribution of toothpaste, toothbrushes and sippy cups into the Better Start engagement packs given to expectant and new parents.
- Launch of Henry Infant Feeding Service which offer universal support to expectant and new parents about healthy infant feeding and early oral health support.
- Supervised tooth brushing schemes across 57 nurseries, childminder settings and reception classes.
- Consistent language and oral health messages, and the development of a targeted communications campaign to promote good oral health.
- Junior Healthier Choice Awards given to eat-in venues that offer families a safe and welcoming space for breast and bottle feeding, as well as providing free milk and water for young children.
- Developing an Oral Health Peer Support role to deliver co-designed and palatable public health messages to the community.
- Commissioning an Oral Health Co-ordinator role to provide practitioner training and family support.

To address the challenges that Blackpool families face in accessing dental services and care, we are working collaboratively with NHS partners and have taken the learning from a 2019 Blackpool pilot called Starting Well to shape our approach. This includes:

- Developing new models of engagement to identify the health needs of families.
- Providing evidence-based oral health training to community practitioners and dental practices.
- Working with dental practitioners to promote oral health messages and deliver early interventions from community settings.
- Providing an effective pathway into NHS dental care and ensure dental health care providers are aware of and responsive to the social barriers families face which may prevent them engaging with oral health prevention and intervention.

Flexible Commissioning

New flexible commissioning arrangements have enabled NHS England partners to work more innovatively by redirecting funding to help target contracted dental activity to specific treatments and patient groups. This has led to working with a local practice who has committed half day per week to see and treat identified children under 5 years who are not currently registered with a dentist.

We are utilising paid protected time for the dentist to initially assess and provide any subsequent dental treatment required to ensure that children are 'orally fit'. To ensure continued capacity the dedicated dental practice will ensure that children are orally fit but will not offer for them to register with the practice. Referrals are currently identified through health visitor and Early Help partners, along with early years settings participating in the Supervised Brushing Scheme.

We are also working with the Oral Health Urgent Care team to develop a referral pathway with them too. Our Community Connector team and dedicated Oral Health Connectors manage referrals and by liaising with both families and the practice, they provide a crucial link to support relationships and improve and maximise take up of appointments. As well as this, Community Connectors attend the half-day session to support parents who may be anxious about attending and to provide advice and signposting.



OUTCOMES

Should the pilot prove successful, future funding may be committed to enable other dental practices across Blackpool to support the project and provide the opportunity to register children and their families.

Since funding was committed in November 2022, 87 families have been referred through the pilot, with 20 families who requested the service failing to either be contacted or attend.

We are currently developing monitoring and information sharing processes to enable Connectors to reach out to families and gain a better understanding of the challenges and barriers families are facing to understand how we can best support them and to better measure the impact of this work on children and their families.

It is anticipated that our combined work to drive behaviour change and prevention will see a significant and permanent shift in the oral health of Blackpool children and families from the very start of life, leading to a reduction in rates of dental decay across communities over time. To achieve this, it will require delivery at scale over the next two years, to ensure that in 3 to 5 years' time babies being born in Blackpool will have better oral health outcomes.