



Public Health
England



Model of oral healthcare for asylum seekers and refugees

How to support access to NHS dentists

Prepared in partnership with:



Context

Public Health England (PHE) identified confusion and barriers to accessing NHS dentists for asylum seekers and refugees. This model of care has been developed with input from Leicester stakeholders to overcome these barriers, improve knowledge and support access.

Purpose and aims of the model of care

Purpose and aims of the model of care are:

- for local authorities and support services (including the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector) to assist asylum seekers and refugees to access NHS dental care and treatment
- to address health literacy and structural barriers asylum seekers and refugees can have when accessing NHS dentists
- to support equitable access for a vulnerable population group
- to define what information is needed for asylum seekers and refugees to sign up to NHS dentists and what they are entitled to
- to support resettlement and integration

Using the model of care

The 7-step model of care clarifies essential information to overcome the barriers to accessing care and treatment. Local support services and networks are best placed to adapt the model of care for the target audience and make it culturally appropriate and acceptable. Tailoring messages will improve oral health and dental health literacy.

Evidence suggests that strategies to improve health literacy are important empowerment tools that can reduce health inequalities. This is because the most disadvantaged groups in society are at risk of limited health literacy and are known to have the poorest health outcomes [1]. Asylum seekers and refugees may have lower health literacy than the host community. This may be due to poor access to educational resources and information programmes. This can be compounded by economic, social and language barriers. They may also have difficulty interacting with health information due to low literacy levels as well as different cultural expectations [2].

Managing expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic

NHS dental services are currently under considerable pressure due to the pandemic. It is important to explain the current limitations and that dentists are currently prioritising the vulnerable or those with urgent needs.

The 7-step model of care for asylum seekers and refugees

1. Access and entitlements

There is widespread confusion on eligibility with professionals, service users and support services. Asylum seekers and refugees are eligible for NHS dental care. This information is in the [PHE Dental Health Migrant Health Guide](#) and accompanying [video](#) (section begins at 07:01). Financial support is available for the cost of NHS dental treatments. Support workers can help service users apply for the [NHS Low Income Scheme](#) if they are not entitled to exemptions and need help with charges (this includes asylum seekers who have had their application refused).

2. How to find an NHS dentist

The 'Find a dentist' facility on the [NHS website](#) allows users to search for the nearest NHS dental practices that are taking on new NHS patients. Support workers may need to help service users complete the dental practice forms. You can ask for the forms before the appointment to make this easier. If there are still difficulties finding an NHS dentist you can contact the local [NHS England and Improvement area team](#), [NHS England Customer Contact Centre](#) or the local [Health Watch](#).

3. No proof of address

There is a common misconception that proof of address is needed to sign up with an NHS dentist. They don't need this proof. If the person is of no fixed address or moves frequently, the practice can use their own address on the 'FP17' dental form.

4. Immigration status

There is no requirement for any service user to provide photo identification, visa or correspondence defining their immigration status. They do not need this proof at an NHS dental practice to access NHS dental care or treatments.

5. Translation services

There is no requirement for any service user to provide their own interpreter. Support workers do not need to accompany service users to dental appointments. If there are **language barriers**, translation or interpretation services are available from the NHS dentist. Service users can request NHS dental practices to provide translation. This supports communication, self-efficacy, access to services and patient safety.

6. Experiences and expectations

Service users may have different or conflicting understanding and expectations of NHS dental care. There may also be **cultural differences** in how people access care. Support workers can help by explaining:

- ‘What can your NHS dentist do for you?’ ([easy-read PDF version](#))
- the process of booking dental appointments
- that dental practices have policies for non-attendance, cancelling appointments, arrival time and removal from practice lists.

Consider including this information at cultural orientation sessions or at community events. You may also want to invite local dental teams to attend these events.

7. Promote prevention

Service users may be used to visiting a dentist when there is a problem, rather than attending before issues arise. This could be a cultural shift for some people, and you can promote prevention by describing:

- the importance of regular **dental check-ups**
- the availability of **fluoride varnish** which can prevent dental decay
- **how to take care of teeth and gums** and **lifestyle tips for good oral health**.

About Public Health England

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