

Mystery Shopping Report

# Access to dentistry for people with disabilities

2019-20

**healthwatch**  
Hillingdon

## About Healthwatch Hillingdon

Healthwatch Hillingdon is a health and social care watchdog. We are here to help our residents get the best out of their health and care services and give them a voice to influence and challenge how health and care services are provided throughout Hillingdon.

Healthwatch Hillingdon has very strong operational relationships with the local NHS, Council and Voluntary Sector organisations. We are an independent partner and a valued “critical friend” within health and social care.

Membership of the Hillingdon Health and Wellbeing Board and Hillingdon Clinical Commissioning Group Governing Body enables us to have a considerable strategic input into the shaping of local commissioning and the delivery of services.

As a local partner, we are kept well-informed, can challenge and seek assurances on behalf of our residents, ensure that the lived experience of patients and the public are heard, and are influencing decisions and improving health and social care in Hillingdon.

## Reports and Recommendations

Healthwatch Hillingdon produces evidence based reports for commissioners and providers, to inform them of the views and experiences of people who use health and social care services in the London Borough of Hillingdon.

Commissioners and providers must have regard for our views, reports and any recommendations made and respond in writing to explain what actions they will take, or why they have decided not to act.

Healthwatch Hillingdon has a duty to publish reports they share with commissioners and providers, and their responses, in public.

Our reports and recommendations are also shared with:

- Hillingdon Health and Wellbeing Board
- Hillingdon External Services Scrutiny Committee
- Healthwatch England
- The Care Quality Commission

## Introduction

Between March and June 2019, Healthwatch Hillingdon conducted a mystery shopping exercise. The objective was to test the accessibility of NHS funded dental practices in Hillingdon for people with mobility problems and physical and sensory disabilities.

## Background

The exercise was undertaken in response to a number of requests received by Healthwatch Hillingdon from local residents to assist them with finding a dental practice with ground level access. Many of those who contacted us were older residents with mobility problems who had difficulty climbing stairs. They told us that they were unsure how or where to find a ground floor dentist in their area and asked for our help.

## Dental services in Hillingdon

All NHS dental services in Hillingdon are commissioned by NHS England (NHSE), but are not managed in the same way as other NHS services. Patients with complex needs including those who have physical disabilities or are housebound can access the community and specialist dental services provided by Central and North West London (CNWL) and Whittington Health (WH) NHS Trusts, with services including:

- Periodontal and Endodontic treatment (CNWL) - Located in Ickenham
- Paediatric and adult special care dentistry (WH) - Located in Uxbridge

Upon the opening of the community dentist in Redford Way, Uxbridge, step free access was not available, leading to affected patients being referred to alternative sites such as Brent, Ealing, Harrow and Hounslow. Whittington Health have confirmed in February 2020 that step free access is now available. More information about services can be found at <https://www.whittington.nhs.uk/default.asp?c=10989>.

## Scope

Our initial objective of this exercise was to ascertain the accessibility of dental practices for people with mobility issues, with a focus on physical access (step-free access) and access by public transport.

However, after a visit to the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)) to obtain a list of NHS dental practices in the Borough of Hillingdon, we were concerned to discover that a significant number of practices were not fully accessible to patients with physical disabilities or sensory impairments (see table 1 below).

As a result of these findings, we felt it necessary to redefine the scope of this exercise to include access for patients with physical and sensory disabilities.

- **Definition of accessibility**

For this report, accessibility refers to physical access and access to communication.

**Physical access** - accessible toilets, disabled parking, step-free access (lifts, ramps, even surfaces) and easily accessible by public transport.

**Communication access** - hearing loops, signing services, information in large print and other formats.

**Table 1**

### Availability of disabled facilities

Taken from the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)) in January 2019

- 3% of dental practices stated that they provided Braille translation service. 19% did not and 78% either did not know or did not answer this question.
- 89% of dental practices did not offer a signing service
- Only 3% of dental practices state they provided a Text Relay service, whilst 19% did not. The remaining 88% did not provide a definitive answer to this question.
- 70% of dental practices did not provide parking for disabled patients.
- 67% of dental practices did not have a disabled WC.
- Only 6% of dental practices stated that they provided step-free access.
- 50% of dental practices stated they provided wheelchair access
- 86% of dental practices stated that they did not provide a Hearing Loop.

## Methodology

We used the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)) to acquire a list of NHS dentists in Hillingdon. We found a total of 36 NHS funded dental practices whilst carrying out our search.

- The visits

A total of 19 face-to-face visits were carried out. The visits were undertaken by three Healthwatch volunteers. They were asked to observe their external surroundings and record details of the following facilities:

- Disabled parking
- Disabled toilets
- Access to BSL interpreters
- Installation of an induction loop
- Step-free access (wheelchair ramps, lifts, even floor services)
- Large print information (appointment cards/letters)
- Adequate lighting
- Access via public transport (train/bus)

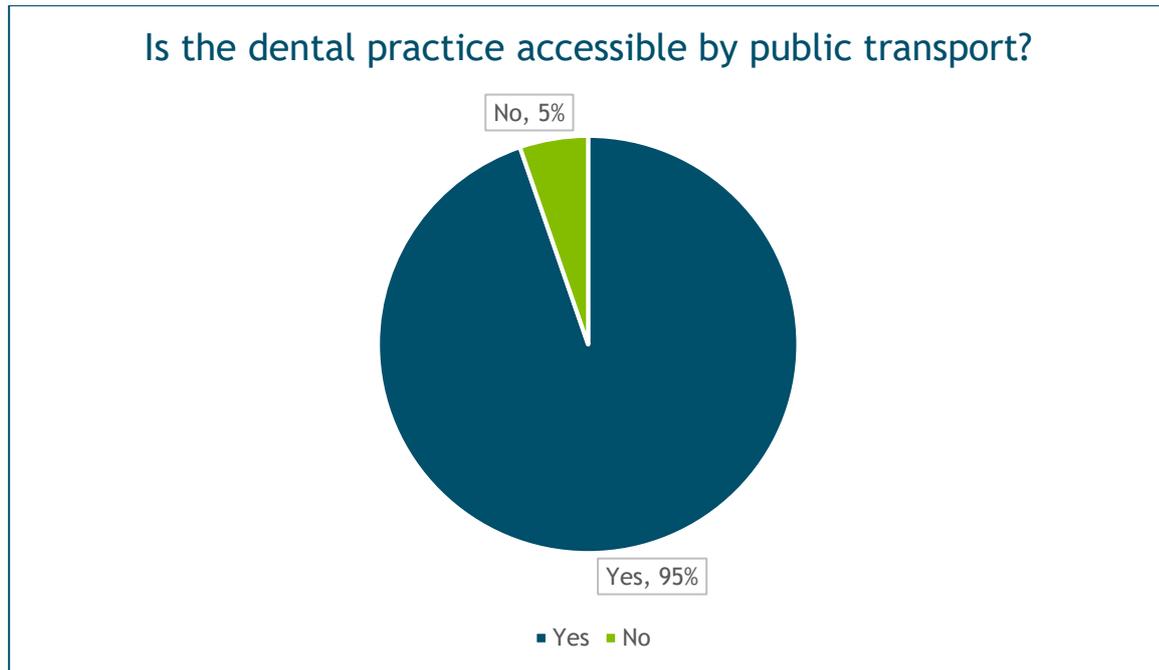
Our mystery shoppers were also provided with a scenario to refer to during their visits to ascertain from practice staff if BSL interpreters were available and if practice information was available in large print.

### The scenario:

*“My uncle is 81 years old. His wife passed away three months ago, and he is moving to the area to live with me. I want to find a dentist for him before he moves to Hillingdon. My uncle has multiple health issues. He has arthritic knees, and sometimes uses a walker or a wheelchair. He is deaf and will require a BSL interpreter for appointments and has some sight loss so requires his appointment letters and cards in large print.*”

## Results

The key findings from our visits are presented in the pie charts below.

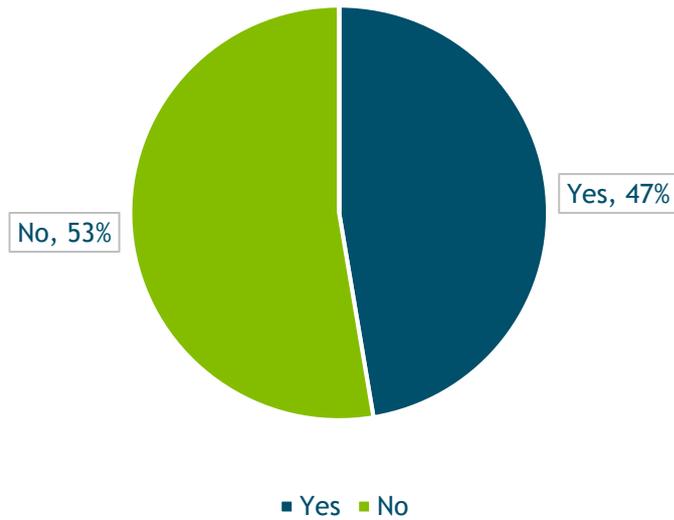


Our mystery shoppers used public transport to carry out their visits. They reported that all but one of the practices were accessible by bus or train.



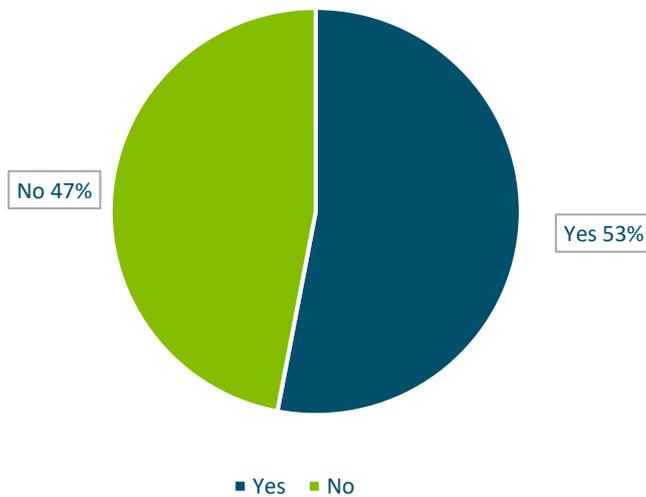
Only 5% (1) of practices had designated parking for disabled patients. This could be a barrier for disabled patients who may rely on their vehicle for getting to their dental appointments.

### Does the dental practice have step-free access?



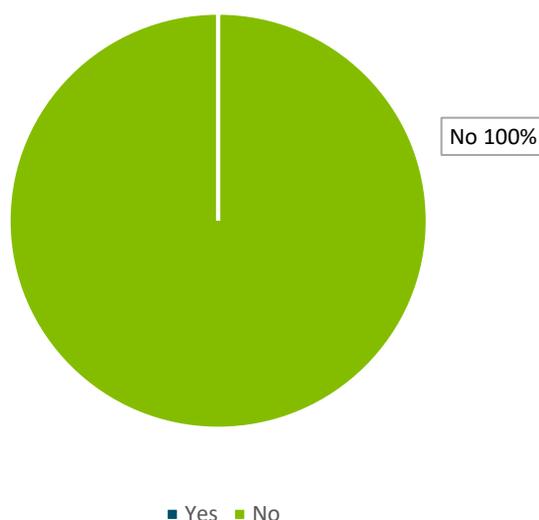
Step-free access refers to access via lifts, wheelchair ramps or level surfaces so patients don't have to use stairs. Just under half the practices visited provided step-free access, meaning over half of all practices visited could not be accessed by a wheelchair user or by someone who has difficulty climbing stairs.

### Does the dental practice have a wheelchair ramp?



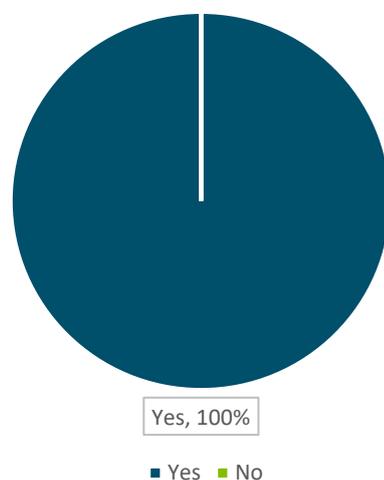
Wheelchair ramps are used to allow easy access for wheelchair users or for people who can't climb stairs because of problems with their mobility. Over half of the practices we visited had a wheelchair ramp installed or available.

### Does the dental practice have a lift?

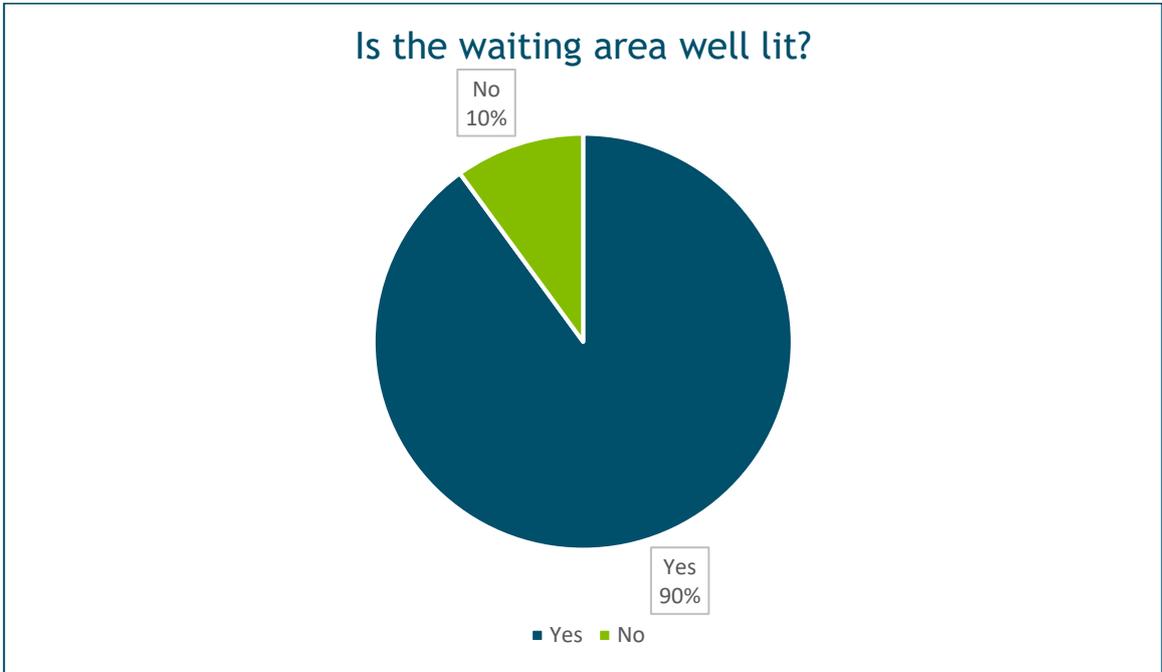


None of the practices visited by our mystery shoppers had a lift installed, although one practice had a stairlift fitted and could be used by patients who could not climb stairs.

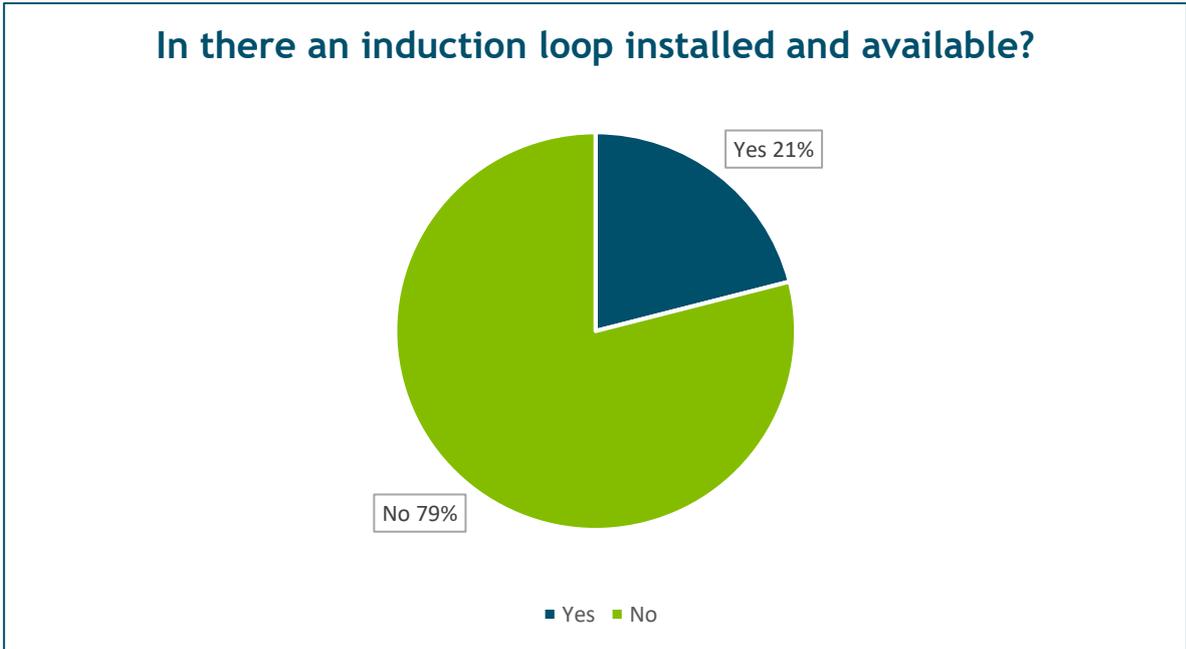
### If access is via stairs, are the stairs fitted with handrails?



Where access to the surgery was via stairs, all practices had handrails fitted to the staircase to act as a support for people who may have problems climbing them.

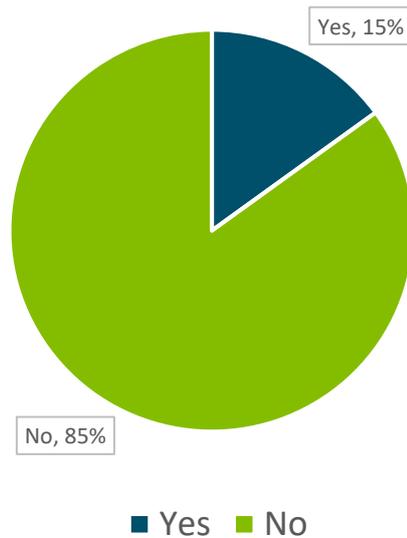


Our mystery shoppers reported that 90% of the practices visited were adequately lit. It is important to state however that none of our mystery shoppers had a visual impairment.



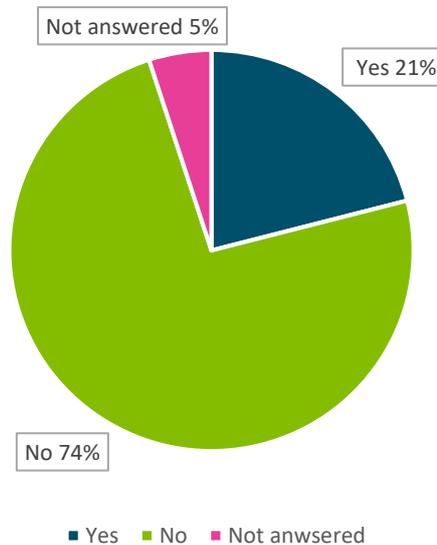
Induction Loops make it easier for people with hearing loss to hear clearly and comfortably in a venue where there is background noise, but only 19% of practices had a hearing induction loop installed. The absence of a hearing loop could act as a barrier to communication for people with hearing impairments.

## Does the practice have disabled toilets?



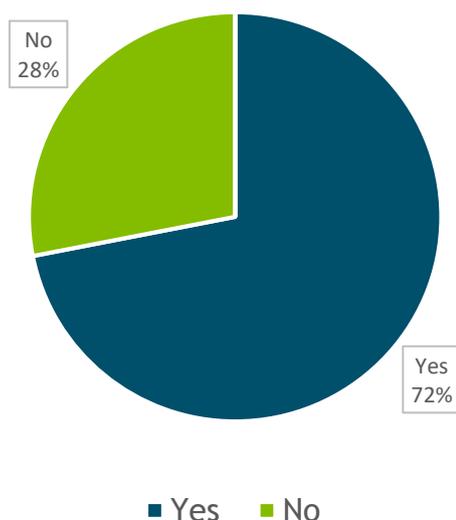
15% of dental practices we visited told us they had disabled toilets. Where disabled toilets were available, there was no clear signage. Our mystery shoppers were only made aware that accessible toilets were available when they asked practice staff.

## Does the dental practice provide a signing service?



Only 21% of practices said they could offer a signing service for patients who were hearing impaired. For those practices that said they did not provide a BSL interpreter, the majority told us that their reason for not doing so was because they had never been asked. One practice told us that patients could bring their own interpreters as long as they were NHS approved.

## Are large print appointment letters available?



Large print leaflets and appointment cards were available from 72% of dental practices, making it easier for patients with visual impairments.

## Conclusion

Of the 19 NHS funded dental practices our mystery shoppers tested in Hillingdon, none were fully accessible to disabled people or people with limited mobility.

Healthwatch Hillingdon acknowledges that not all barriers to accessing dentistry can be easily overcome. For instance, if a building is configured in a way that does not allow for a physically disabled person to gain access then physical improvements to the practice may be costly or impractical.

However, some barriers can be addressed to make practices more disability-friendly. The installation of a Hearing Loop for instance or access to Braille services if these are not currently being offered.

It is also important to highlight that the **Equality Act 2010** and more specifically the **Accessible Information Standard** requires all service providers to make sure that people who have a disability, impairment or sensory loss get any communication support that they need. This means that they need to make sure that people get information in different formats.

- [NHS website](#)

Whilst we found the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)) to be an invaluable source of information when searching for NHS dentists in Hillingdon, not all dentists are using it to provide up-to-date information about their disabled facilities.

The onus is on individual practices to keep their information on the site up to date but in several cases, we found dental practices which had not made entries on the site since 2010. Meaning that patients cannot rely on this information to determine if a practice meets their accessibility needs. *Please see appendix 1 for further details.*

Furthermore, the findings of our visits highlight some discrepancies between the data gathered via our visits, which was based on visits to 19 dental practices and the data we extracted from the website. This tells us that some of the information we obtained from the website may also be inaccurate or incomplete. Please see table 2 below.

**Table 2**

Table two below clearly shows that are significant differences between the data we gathered for our visits and the data taken from the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)). For instance, 5% of dental practices we visited provided disabled parking, whereas this figure was higher at 22% from the data gathered from the NHS website.

FACILITY/SERVICE	MYSTERY SHOPPING VISITS	NHS WEBSITE
Disabled parking	5%	22%
Step-free access	47%	6%
Induction loop	21%	6%
Disabled toilets	15%	28%
Signing service	21%	3%

## Recommendations

As a result of this mystery shopping exercise, Healthwatch Hillingdon would recommend that NHS dental practices in Hillingdon consider the following actions:

- All NHS dental practices should undertake an audit of their disabled facilities and aids and ensure their information is regularly updated on the NHS website ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)). This will provide patients who may use the site to look for an accessible dentist with current information.
- All practices should work towards the full implementation of the **Accessibility Information Standard** to ensure patients have access to the communication support they need. This should include the provision of hearing loops, access to BSL interpreters and access to information in an alternative format.
- Where possible, new practices should be planned or adapted to ensure they are fully accessible for wheelchair users and people with mobility issues.

We welcome the opening of a new dental practice in Yiewsley offering ground floor **Disability Discrimination (DDA)** compliant access.

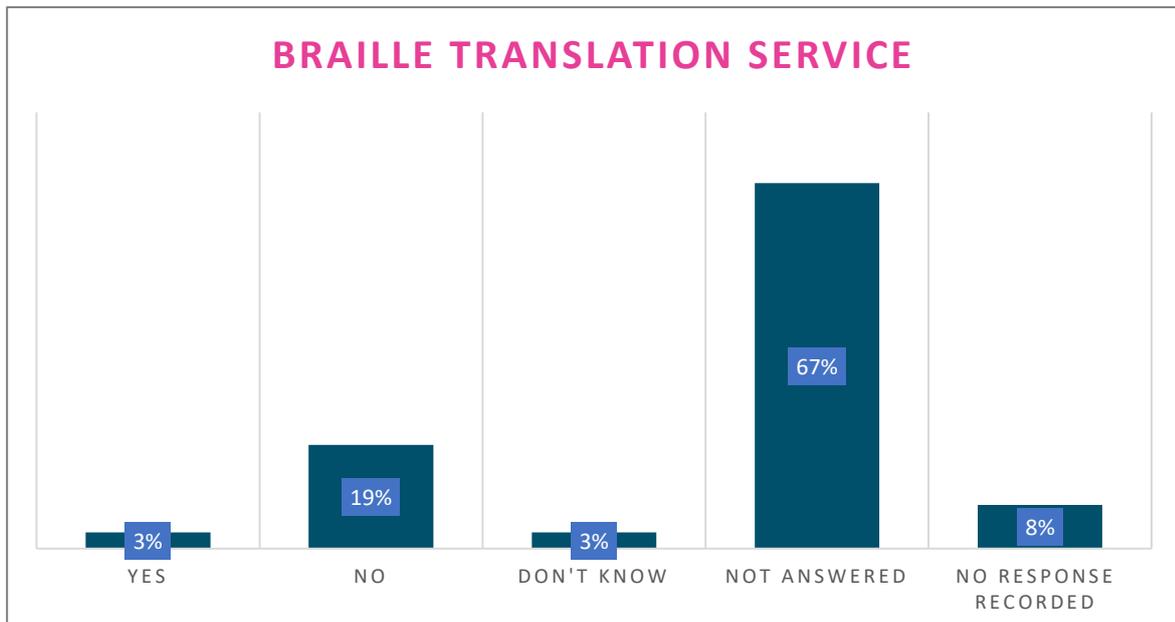
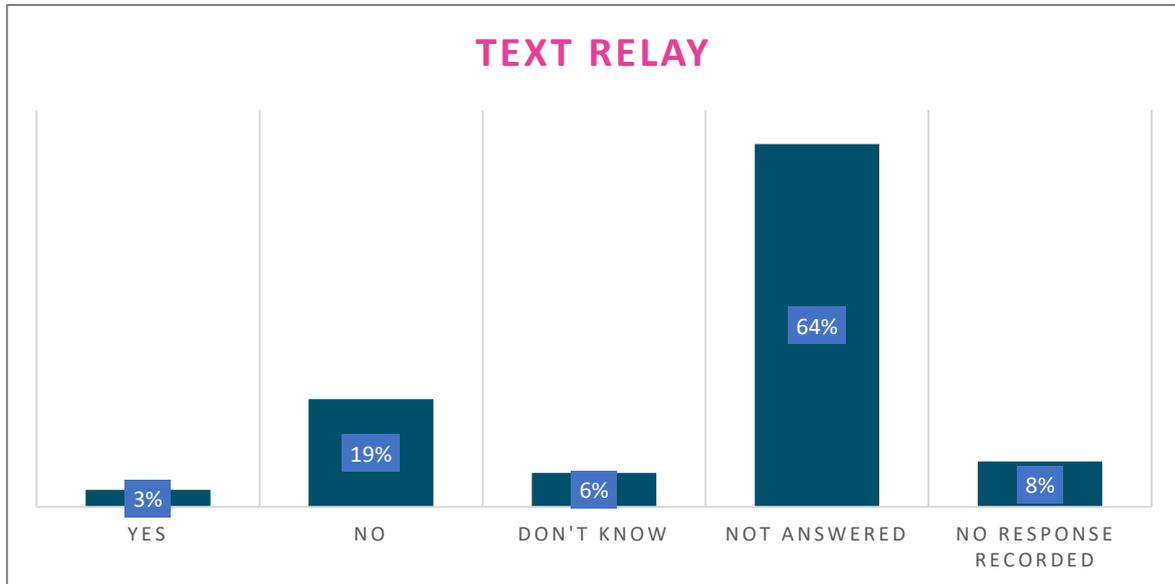
## Response from the Local Dental Committee

In response to the recommendations made in this report, the Local Dental Committee said: "The LDC welcomes the report from Healthwatch Hillingdon and will work with local colleagues, NHS England and Improvement, NHS Digital and local stakeholders to make sure that patients have access to relevant information about the dental services available to them."

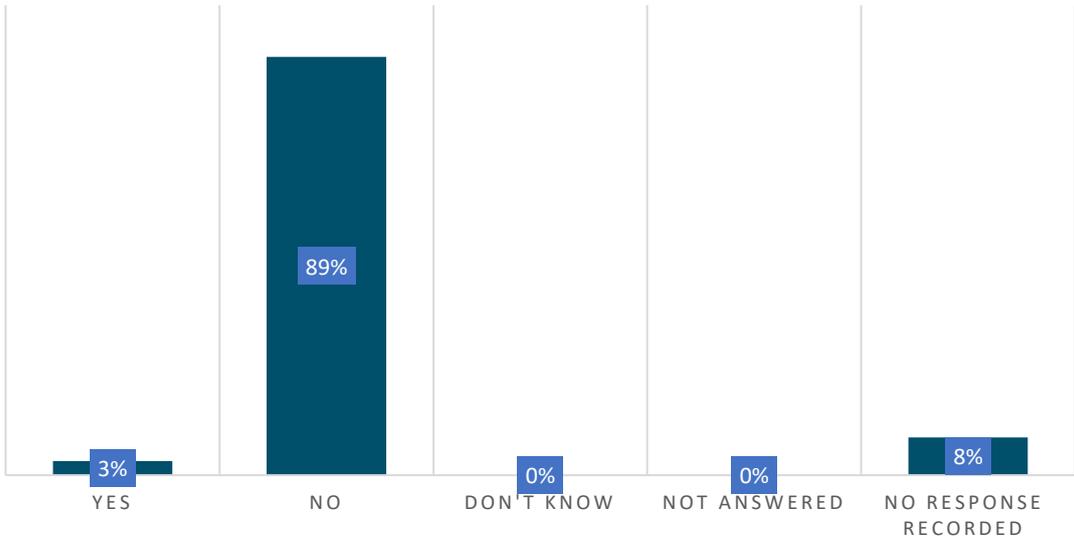
## Appendices

### Appendix 1

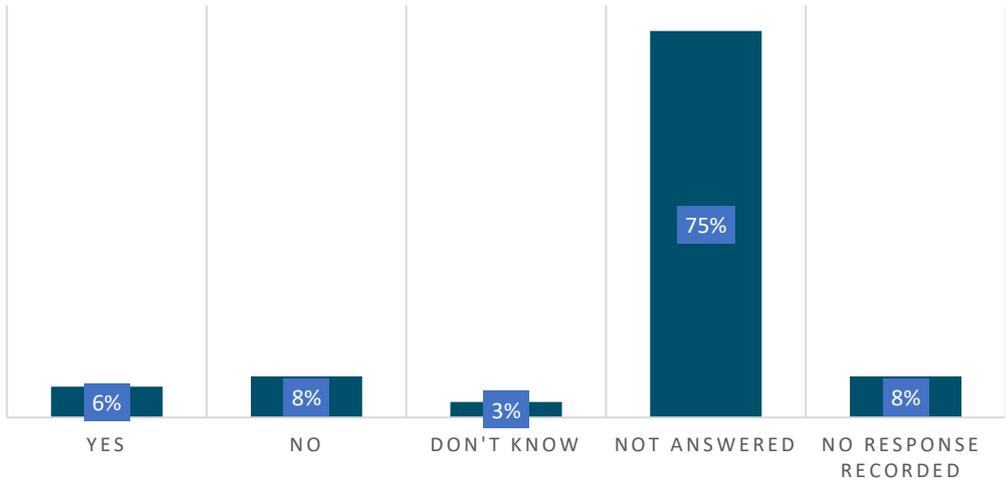
Information extracted from the NHS Website (January 2019)



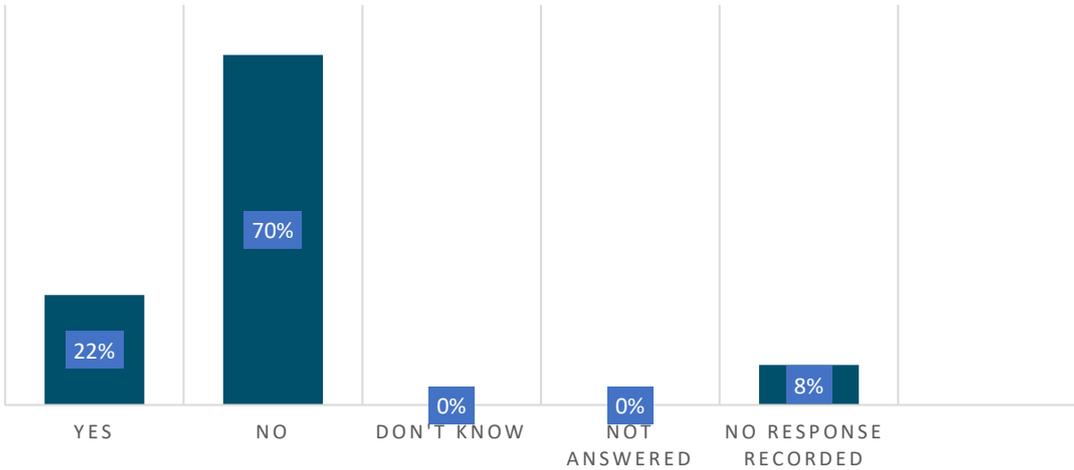
### SIGNING SERVICE

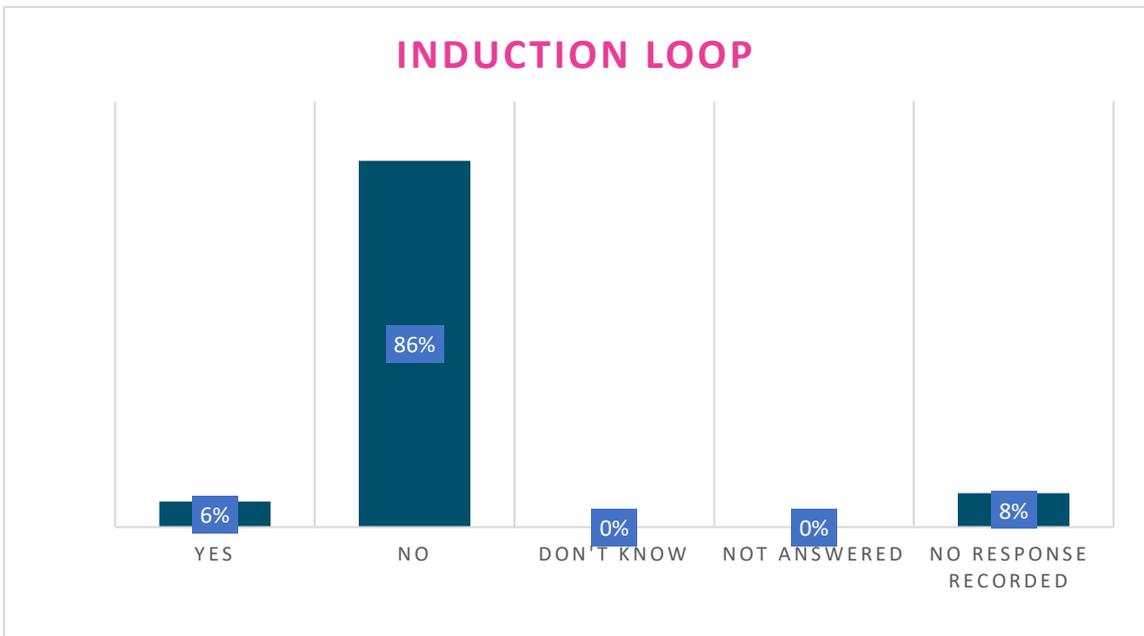
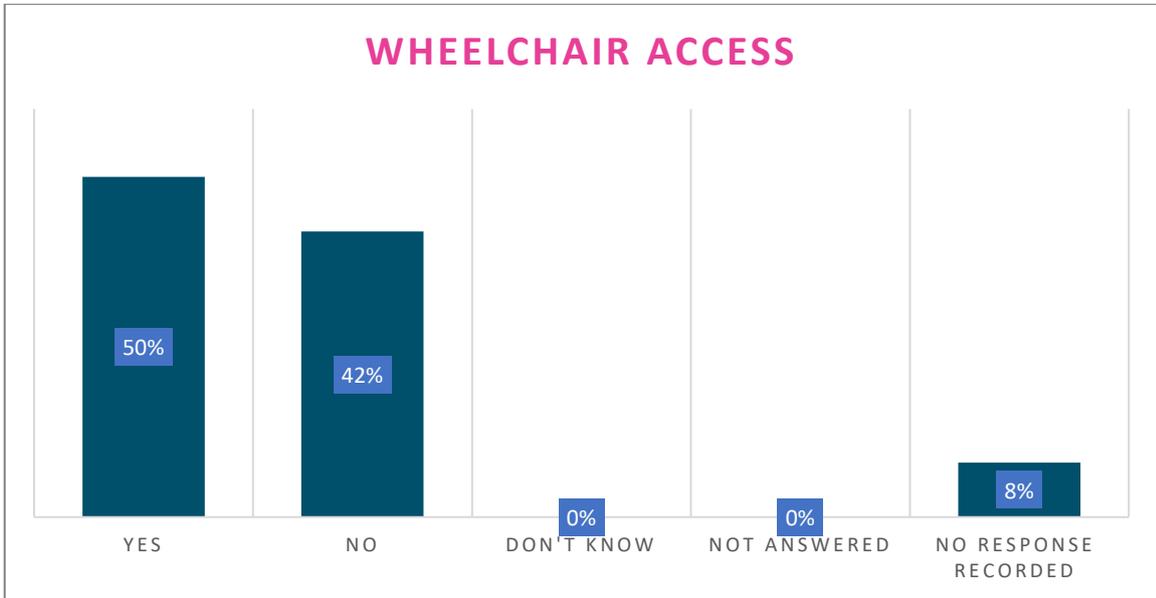
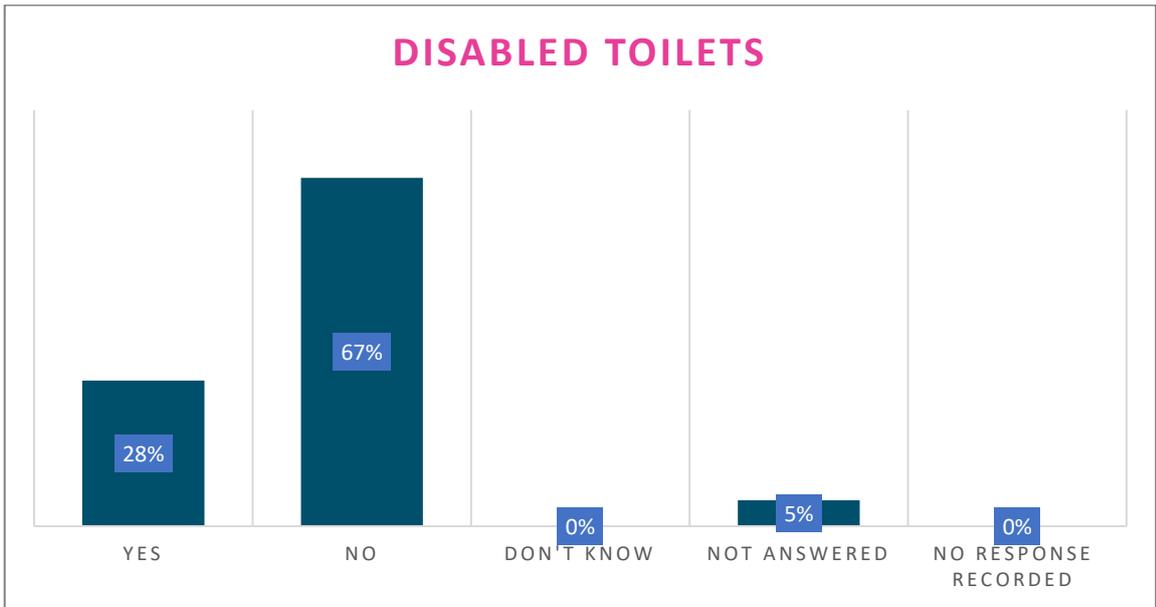


### STEP FREE ACCESS



### DISABLED PARKING





**Healthwatch Hillingdon**  
**20 Chequers Square**  
**Pavilions Shopping Centre**  
**Uxbridge**  
**UB8 1LN**  
**Tel: 01895 272997**  
**Email: [office@healthwatchhillingdon.org.uk](mailto:office@healthwatchhillingdon.org.uk)**

**Web: [www.healthwatchhillingdon.org.uk](http://www.healthwatchhillingdon.org.uk)**  
**Company Limited by Guarantee | Registered in England and Wales**  
**Company Number: 8445068**  
**Registered Charity Number: 1152553**  
**Main Contact: Daniel West | Position: Managing Director**  
**Email: [danielr.west@healthwatchhillingdon.org.uk](mailto:danielr.west@healthwatchhillingdon.org.uk) | Tel: 01895 272997**