

Smile:Together
Creating Healthier Happier Communities



Enter & View

Smile Together Penzance

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1 Introduction

1.1 Details of visit

Service provider	Smile Together (Penzance)
Service Address	The Lescudjack Centre, Penmere CI, TR18 3PE
Date and time	9 th September 2024 1.30pm–4.30pm
Authorised representatives	Abi Harding-White

1.2 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Cornwall would like to thank patients and staff for their positive contribution to this Enter and View visit and the subsequent report.

1.3 Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings observed on the specific date above and is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all patients and staff, only an account of what was observed and contributed at the time of the visit.

2 What is Enter and View?

As a local Healthwatch we are authorised to “Enter and View” health and social care services through the following legislation;

- Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007
- Local Authorities Regulations 2013 (part 4)

These services can include hospitals, residential homes, GP practices, dental surgeries, optometrists, and pharmacies.

The goal of Enter and View is to see services in action and understand the experiences of individuals who use them. It is an opportunity for us to observe service delivery, listen to the views of the people using health and social care services and make recommendations where there are areas for improvement.

Enter and View visits are organised based on feedback received about individual services, in response to themes identified in our research, or when services have a good reputation enabling us to share examples of best practice from the perspective of people who experience the service first-hand.

Healthwatch Cornwall Enter and Views are not intended to specifically identify safeguarding issues. However, if safeguarding concerns arise during a visit, they are reported in accordance with Healthwatch safeguarding policies. If at any time an authorised representative observes anything that they feel uncomfortable about they inform their lead who will inform the service manager, ending the visit.

In addition, if any member of staff wishes to raise a safeguarding issue about their employer, they will be directed to the CQC where they are protected by legislation if they raise a concern.

2.1 Purpose of visit

- To observe the nature and quality of service facilities

- To observe how people experience the service
- To gather views from patients and staff on the service

2.2 Strategic drivers

Over the past year, the most consistent feedback Healthwatch Cornwall have received has been related to dentistry and access to dental care. In response to these concerns, we are undertaking a dentistry research project and conducting Enter and View visits to dental practices across the region. We selected practices based on their provision of NHS care and their location, ensuring that we cover a broad geographic area within Cornwall. This approach helps us understand the accessibility and quality of dental services across different communities. Healthwatch Cornwall can use this evidence to make recommendations and inform changes for both individual services as well as system wide.

2.3 Methodology

This was an announced visit, and we worked with the practice to organise the date and time of the visit. An initial email was sent explaining the role of Healthwatch Cornwall, what Enter and View is, the purpose of the visit, and a proposed date and time for the visit to take place. A further email was sent confirming the agreed details of the visit and included a formal letter, Enter and View notice and a general Healthwatch Cornwall poster.

The authorised representative (Enter and View officer) conducted the visit between 1.30pm and 4.30pm in the main waiting area.

Patients were approached and asked if they would be willing to discuss their experiences. Additionally, they were asked if they felt they had time to do so before their appointment so as not to cause stress or disrupt service delivery. A reflective conversational approach was used to gather feedback on what they felt the practice did well and what could be improved.

In addition, we were able to speak with the practice manager, senior dental nurse, and service manager to gather their perspectives. Observations were also made regarding the quality of the facilities and patient experience of the service, including their interactions with staff.

At the end of the visit, the authorised representative was able to give initial feedback to the practice manager and explained the next steps regarding reporting.

3 Findings

3.1 Overview

Smile Together Penzance delivers a significant portion of NHS care. The practice is staffed by a dedicated team comprising four dentists, six nurses, one receptionist, a practice manager, and a service manager.

The facility operates three types of surgeries: routine, orthodontic, and special care. Routine surgery is conducted three days a week and is available to patients of all ages under the NHS, with an average daily attendance of 20 to 30 patients. The special care surgery, also scheduled three days a week, offers longer appointment durations tailored to the individual needs of patients. Additionally, the practice allocates two general emergency slots on Tuesdays and Thursdays for urgent cases.

Patients requiring special care or orthodontic treatment are typically referred by other dental practices or health professionals through a Referral Management System (RMS). This system plays a crucial role in coordinating treatment and ensuring effective communication between the referring providers and Smile Together. It facilitates the seamless transfer of essential patient information, treatment histories, and any special considerations necessary for providing comprehensive care.

The practice rents its facilities from Trelya, a charitable organisation dedicated to enhancing health and well-being in West Cornwall, which also operates an on-site café. The building is located within a cul-de-sac and features a small parking area, along with limited residential street parking options. The communal areas of the building, as well as the practice itself, are designed to be accessible, equipped with a shared accessible toilet and baby changing facilities that cater to both Smile Together and Trelya.

Inside, the practice boasts a spacious waiting room and an accessible reception area, which includes a lower counter to accommodate all patients. A hearing loop is available to assist individuals with hearing impairments. Furthermore, the accessible special care practice room is equipped with a wheelchair tipper and banana boards, ensuring that patients who may be vulnerable or require additional support can access dental services effectively, including sedation when necessary.

3.2 Practice Observations

During the visit, the practice maintained a calm and quiet atmosphere, with only a few patients present, complemented by soft music playing in the background. The space was bright, airy, and well-maintained, contributing to an overall sense of cleanliness and comfort.

For the younger visitors, dental-themed colouring sheets were readily available, adding to an engaging element for children. Informative signage throughout the practice included community resources, such as Slimming World and Children's Hospice, as well as a charity collection box supporting these organisations.

While the toilet facilities were noted to be adequately equipped, it was unfortunate that they had run out of toilet paper, which may have impacted the overall patient experience.

The patients who did attend the practice appeared content and at ease, enjoying positive interactions with all the staff, who were notably friendly and accommodating. A particularly commendable moment occurred when a dentist approached a hard-of-hearing patient; they walked up to greet the patient personally and waved, demonstrating a clear understanding of the individual's needs and a commitment to providing inclusive care.

The receptionist maintained a friendly and professional demeanour throughout the visit. One patient attempted to schedule a follow-up appointment; however, the receptionist explained that the dentist would be leaving soon and placed the patient on a waiting list, advising them to call the main number in case of an emergency.

Another patient arrived to pay for a previous appointment and to book a new one after experiencing issues with the system during their last visit. This patient expressed frustration due to their appointments being cancelled twice and their subsequent placement on a waiting list for rescheduling. Despite the evident dissatisfaction from both patients, the receptionist remained calm and polite, handling the interactions with grace and professionalism.

3.3 Summary of Feedback

All patients spoken to were complimentary of the quality of care received and communication with the practice. However, the shortage of dentists has led to challenges for routine patients seeking to secure appointments. Many of these

patients experience difficulties in scheduling timely visits, which can hinder their access to necessary care. In contrast, orthodontic patients benefit from a more streamlined process; they typically receive their next appointment before leaving the practice and generally express satisfaction with their dental journey.

Through the conversations with staff, we were able to gain a better understanding of the different surgeries the practice runs and how they are managed differently. The team also explained some of the difficulties they are facing currently, particularly in terms of recruitment for routine dentists.

3.4 Patient Feedback

We were able to gather feedback from five patients. Three patients had been with the practice at least one year. One patient was there for a routine appointment, three for orthodontic appointments, and one was a registered patient accompanying their child for an orthodontic appointment. On the day of the visit, there were no special care patients attending the practice.



“Daughter has orthodontic appointments and regular check-ups. Never had a problem getting her an appointment. Staff, care, and facilities are good. No complaints. They’re good as gold with her. Really good experience. She would rather come here than go to the doctor.”



Positive Feedback

- A patient who initially connected with the practice through the Smiles at Sea Harbour tour expressed appreciation for the opportunity to register as a routine patient after the scheme concluded. They reflected on their fortunate situation, stating, “millions of people do not have a dentist,” highlighting the importance of accessibility to dental care.
- The practice employs effective communication strategies, including sending appointment reminders via text message, which helps to keep patients informed

about their upcoming visits. This proactive approach contributes positively to the overall patient experience and fosters a sense of engagement and organisation.

- Despite facing staffing challenges, the staff at the practice demonstrate commendable dedication and professionalism. Their ability to provide high-quality service under such constraints reflects a commitment to patient care that is noteworthy.
- The referral and assessment process between a patient's own dentist and the Smile Together orthodontist service is streamlined and straightforward. This efficiency facilitates a smoother transition for patients, ensuring that they receive the necessary care without unnecessary delays.
- Moreover, dentists at the practice take the time to engage with children during orthodontic consultations. They explain treatment options in a manner that is accessible to both children and their parents, fostering understanding and reducing anxiety about dental procedures.
- Appointments within the orthodontic service are consistently punctual, allowing patients to receive their next appointment before they leave the practice. This reliability contributes to a well-organised experience and helps patients feel valued and respected.
- The quality of care provided in the orthodontic service is rated highly by patients, who often express satisfaction with their experiences. Many describe their entire dental journey as very positive, indicating that the practice effectively meets their needs and expectations throughout the treatment process.



“They are really nice, helpful and consistent.”



Constructive Feedback

- A routine patient expressed appreciation for the quality of the practice but noted challenges with service delivery over the past two years. Due to a shortage of

dentists, they encountered difficulties in booking an appointment, resulting in their first check-up and treatment in two years with a different dentist during their most recent visit. This highlights the impact of staffing shortages on patient access to necessary care.

- The closure of the previous Smile Together practice in Camborne has created additional challenges for patients who must now travel to Penzance for their appointments. This change has implications for parents, as it affects their ability to pick up their children from school on time and increases the time spent in traffic. Such logistical concerns can deter patients from seeking care and may affect overall satisfaction.
- An adult accompanying their child to an orthodontic appointment shared their experience as a registered patient at the practice, noting they have not seen a dentist in 18 months. Despite being aware of the need for dental attention, their treatment approach has become reactive rather than proactive, limited to emergency care situations. This situation underscores the need for improved access to dental services for all patients, including adults.
- Parking availability at the practice can also pose challenges, as it can be difficult to find suitable parking at peak times. This issue adds another layer of complexity to the patient's experience, particularly for those with time-sensitive appointments.
- Lastly, the practice's staff levels are insufficient to meet the growing demand for services. Addressing this staffing concern would likely improve patient access and overall satisfaction, allowing the practice to provide more timely and comprehensive care.



"Really good. They're nice people and good with him (child). They have a clear and personal approach and explain everything. He was nervous but not now."



3.5 Staff Feedback

During our discussion with the practice manager, senior dental nurse, and service manager, several key themes emerged regarding the strengths and challenges faced by the practice, as well as the broader context of NHS dentistry.

Practice Strengths

- The team feels it is hard for patients to understand the context of how difficult things are currently. They expressed that they go above and beyond for their patients and are always trying to improve the service they provide.
- Smile Together is commissioned to provide special care dentistry for 2,153 patients per year but receives a large number of referrals weekly and therefore prioritises those with pain and swelling. A registered professional conducts welfare checks for patients on the waiting list. Demand for this service outweighs capacity and the practice regularly over delivers, receiving no additional funding for doing so.
- The practice rarely has missed appointments, but when they do, they call patients on the waiting list to fill the gaps. Appointment reminders are sent automatically for registered routine patients, while the receptionist calls and texts special care patients.

Practice Challenges

- The primary contract is with the NHS, but recruitment poses a significant challenge in fulfilling it. They currently have a vacancy for a full-time dentist that has been advertised for several years, leaving the practice without a permanent dentist. They are relying on internal locums, but one will be leaving soon, while the other is being temporarily "borrowed" from the Truro practice. As a result, routine registered patients are on an internal waiting list until the position is filled. Although they strive to maintain a high standard of care, managing this is more difficult due to the national dentist shortage and difficulties recruiting in Cornwall.

3.6 Feedback on NHS Dentistry

The current contract ends on the 31st of March 2026, and the team suggested that longer-term contracts with the NHS could provide more time and resources for further investment in the facilities, as well as contribute to attract more dentists with longer contracts meaning that training and development programmes, golden hello's and other incentives could be offered.

4 Recommendations

The visit was overall a positive one and Healthwatch Cornwall have offered some recommendations based on observations and feedback from patients.

- To further enhance the overall patient experience and service delivery at the practice, it may be beneficial to ensure that the toilet facilities are checked regularly and stocked with essential items, such as toilet paper.
- Fostering open and transparent communication with patients about the challenges associated with providing routine appointments could be valuable. By keeping patients informed, the practice can help cultivate understanding and trust, allowing individuals to manage their expectations regarding appointment availability.
- Continuing to engage hard-to-reach communities through dental initiatives such as the Smiles at Sea Harbour Tour is recommended. These outreach efforts can help improve access to dental care for underserved populations, reinforcing the practice's commitment to inclusivity and community engagement.

5 Provider Response

The toilet facilities are not only used by our patients, but by visitors to the Treylla Centre and as we rent our space from them, it is their responsibility to maintain this area. Employees of the Practice have their own bathroom to use so unless an issue was raised with us by a patient, we would not be aware.

In relation to the 'closure' of Camborne, to be clear this location is not closed, however services are paused and are likely to remain so until it is understood what the commissioning intentions of the ICB are. The reason for pausing services is the potential negative impact on patient experience due to what we perceive are less than adequate building provided disabled facilities. We are in discussion with the landlord regarding this issue, however, notwithstanding the ICB commissioning intentions being unclear, we will not reinstate services until we feel we can provide an appropriate patient experience.

In relation to our staffing levels are insufficient; Staffing levels for the Personal Dental Services contract (special care element), we have sufficient resources to deliver services under this contract. However, for General Dental Services (GDS) we are carrying multiple vacancies. We are in active recruitment to attract a GDP and have applied and successfully been accepted to the Southwest Regional Dental Recruitment Incentive Scheme. This is a national scheme set up to offer recruitment incentives into NHS dentistry.

With regards to being able to meet the 'growing demand'; This is determined by the ICB as part of their needs assessment and subsequent commissioned activity. Overall, this is a commissioning responsibility, however, as a CIC we aim to do what we can within the scope of the provider world to support access to NHS dentistry for those who need it most and regularly fund dental initiatives where we can.

Smile Together have a patient e-newsletter which is circulated every month to people who have subscribed to us, but it is for the whole of Smile Together not for individual practices. Prior to your visit the team had already been discussing providing an update to our patients on the current situation regarding recruitment. We have now drafted correspondence detailing our current situation and providing details on the process to follow if they have a dental emergency. This will be sent in due course. Moving forward we will provide regular updates.

With regards to engaging with hard-to-reach communities we will take your recommendation under advisement.

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