



Access to NHS dentistry

New polling findings, 2024

healthwatch

Aims of the research



Provide independent feedback on impact of (previous government's) 'Dental Recovery Plan' on access to NHS dentistry and inform new government's 'Dental Rescue Plan'



Run two polls at point of Recovery Plan launch (March 2024) and six months later (September 2024)



Gather new evidence on patients' awareness of how NHS dentistry system works and preferences for the future (September poll only)



Analyse what the public has been sharing with the Healthwatch network about dental care. We share some of these experiences in this presentation.



Update Healthwatch England evidence: last major poll carried out in [February 2021](#), and dentistry elements in other broad polls in [Jan 2024](#), [Nov 2023](#) and [Jan 2023](#)



Provide indicative data on regional variation to network of 153 local Healthwatch. Local base samples are small, so breakdowns only used internally.

About the polling

We commissioned two polls from Savanta

Nationally representative by age, region, and gender in England.

- **1- 3 March, 2024:** 1,942 adults (people aged 18 or over) living in England
- **13-15 September, 2024:** 1,791 adults (people aged over 18) living in England

Key questions asked in both polls:

- When did you last attend an NHS dental appointment?
- If seen in last two years, experience of access, information, care from the individual dentist, NHS dental charges and access for any children.
- If not seen in last two years, reasons why, what you did next, and impact on you.

New questions in September poll only:

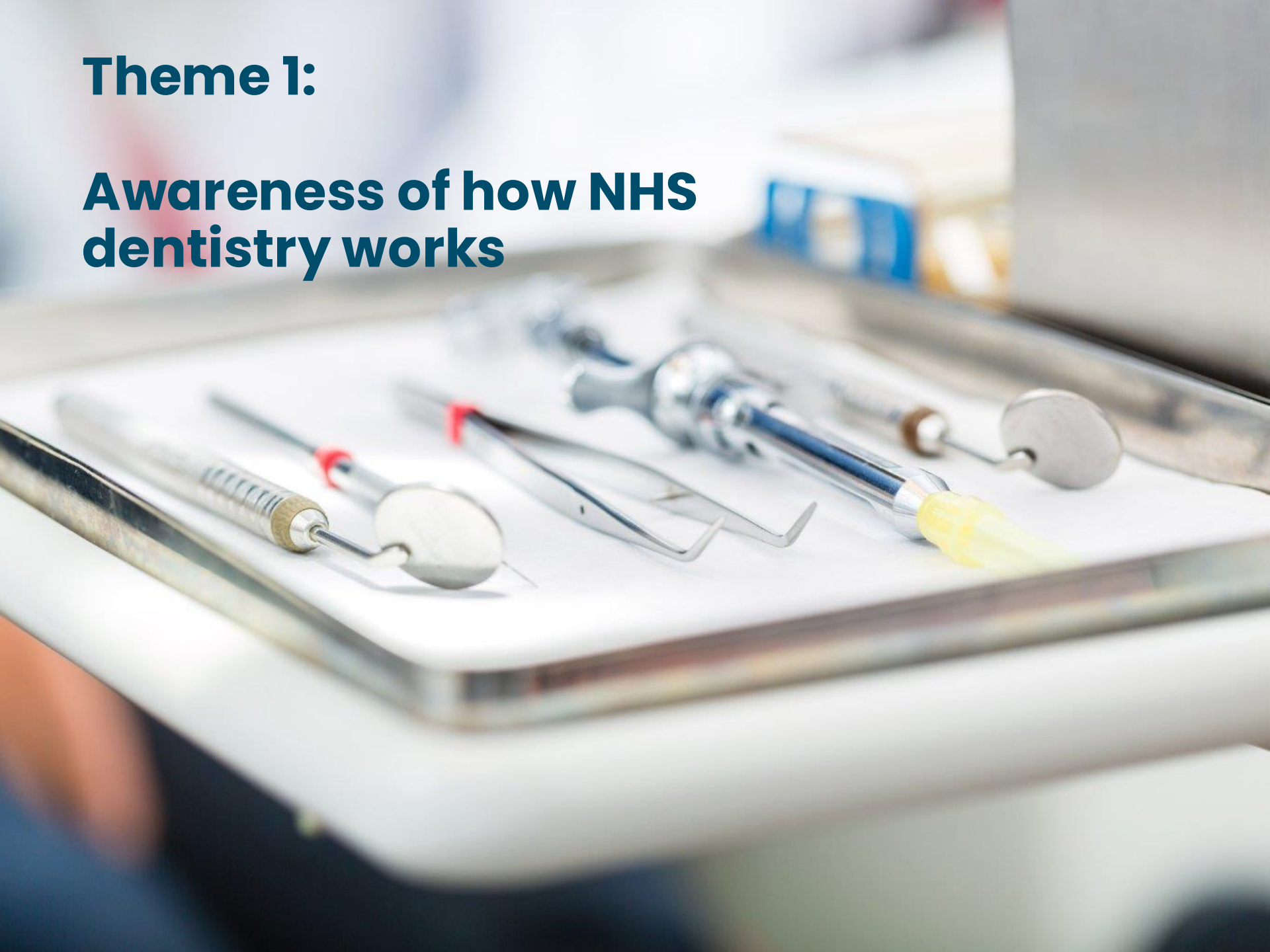
- Your understanding of dental 'registration'
- Your preferred future model for accessing routine NHS dental care.

Poll results: Summary

	March	September
Attended an NHS dentist appointment in last two years	60%	60%
Not seen on NHS in last 2 years because unable to get appointment	16%	16%
Seen on NHS, who'd waited longer than wanted for appointment	31%	33%
Seen on NHS, said difficult to find information about NHS dental costs	16%	20%
Seen on NHS, who felt NHS dentists charged more than advertised	13%	19%
Unable to get NHS appointment, dental problem got more serious	15%	20%
Unable to get NHS appointment, who lived in constant pain	19%	19%
Unable to get NHS appointment, who had to go private	26%	27%
Parents who could only get NHS treatment for child by signing themselves up as a private patient	4%	6%
Seen on NHS, felt dentist put them at ease	83%	82%
Seen on NHS, said dentist treated them with respect	86%	85%

Theme 1:

**Awareness of how NHS
dentistry works**





The way you sign up with a dentist in England can be confusing. We wanted to know if people understood how the current system works.



In the September poll, we asked if people think they have the right to register permanently with a dentist, like you do with a GP.

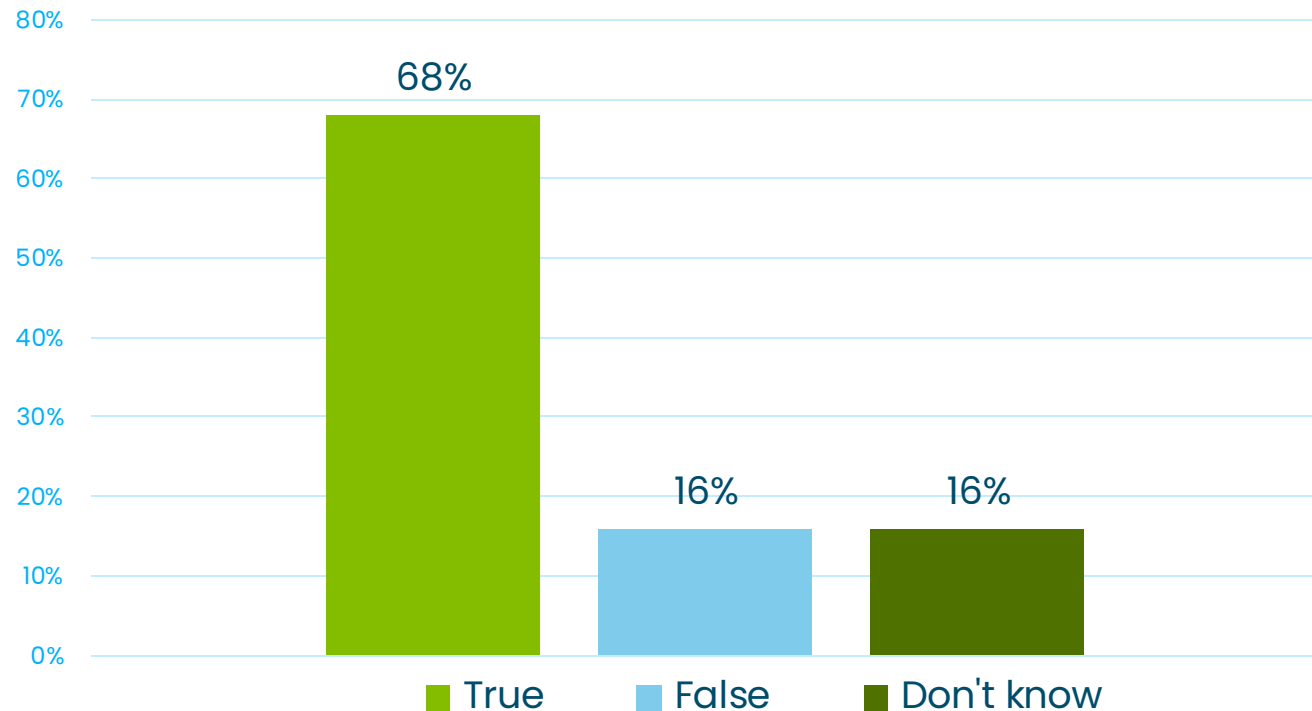


This is not how the system works. In reality, a patient is only the responsibility of the practice while undergoing a course of treatment, not permanently.

Most people believed this statement was true:

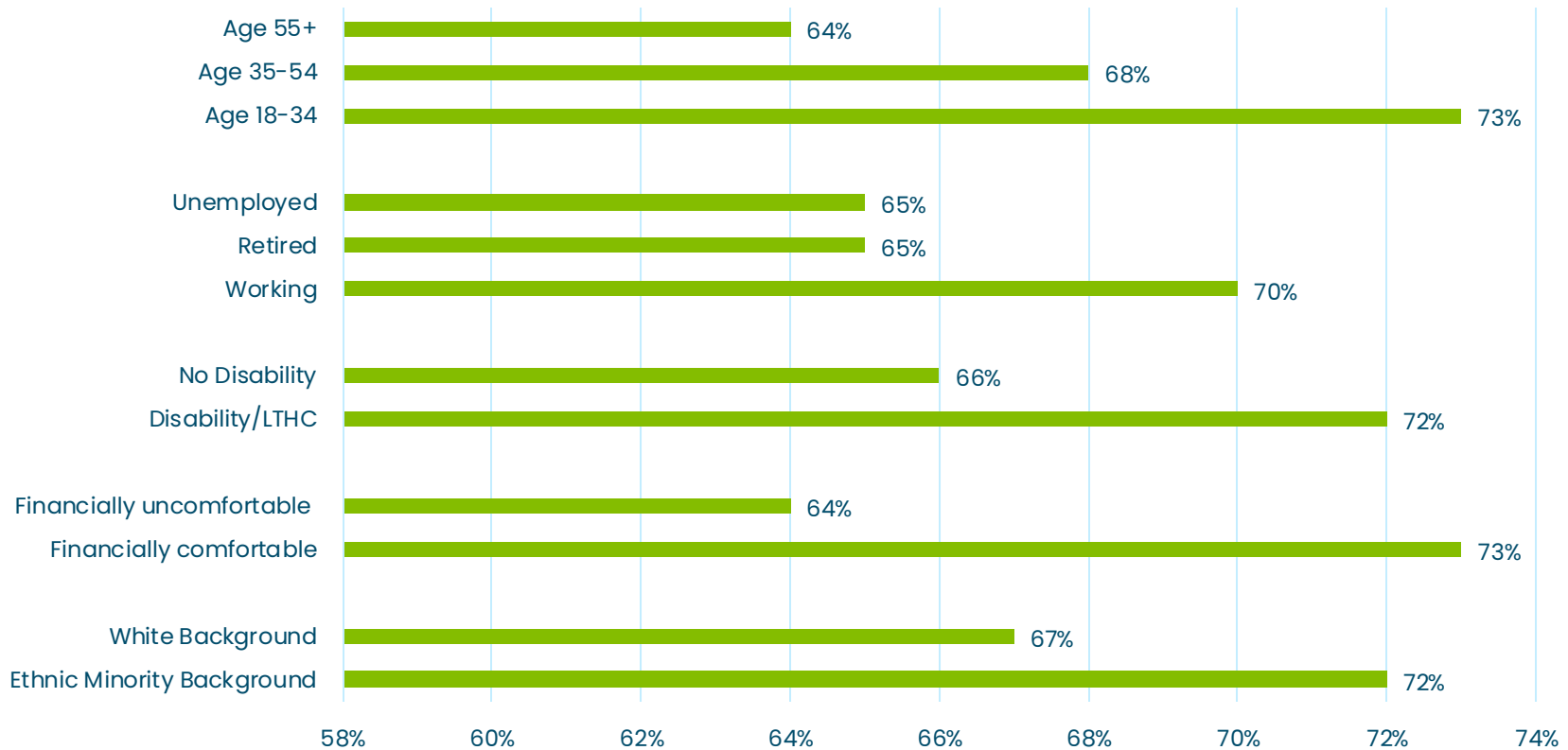
'I have the right to register with an NHS dentist and be taken on as a permanent patient in the same way as I do with an NHS GP.'

(base: All respondents, 1,791, asked in September only)



How does this vary by different groups?

The breakdown below shows this belief varies significantly by age, employment status, disability, financial status and ethnic background.



What do people want from the NHS?



Currently, the NHS does not have a system of permanent patient registration with dentists.



The new government plans in the long term to reform the NHS dental system, but no model has yet been proposed.

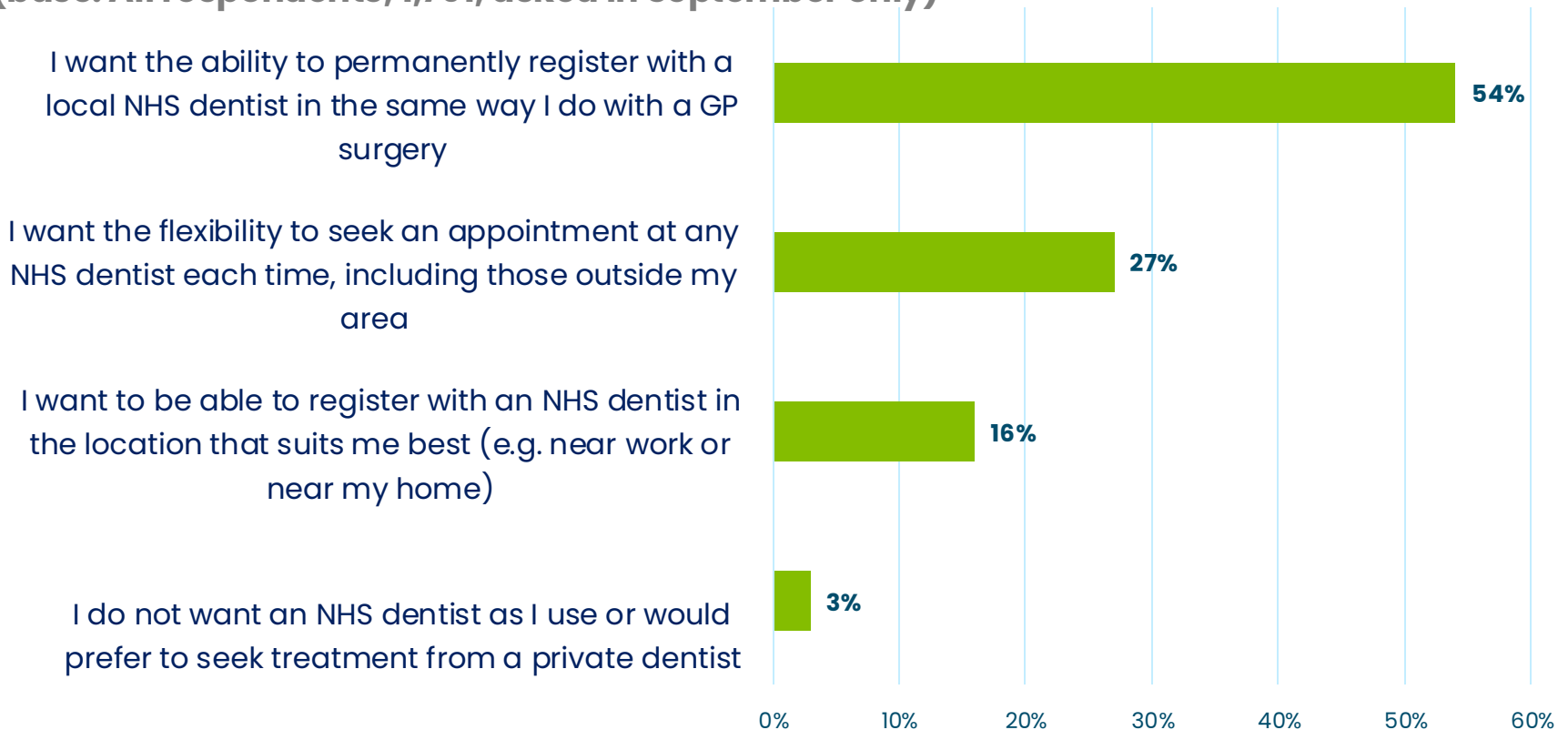


We wanted to test what kind of theoretical systems for registering with a dentist the public might want in the future.

What do people want from the NHS?

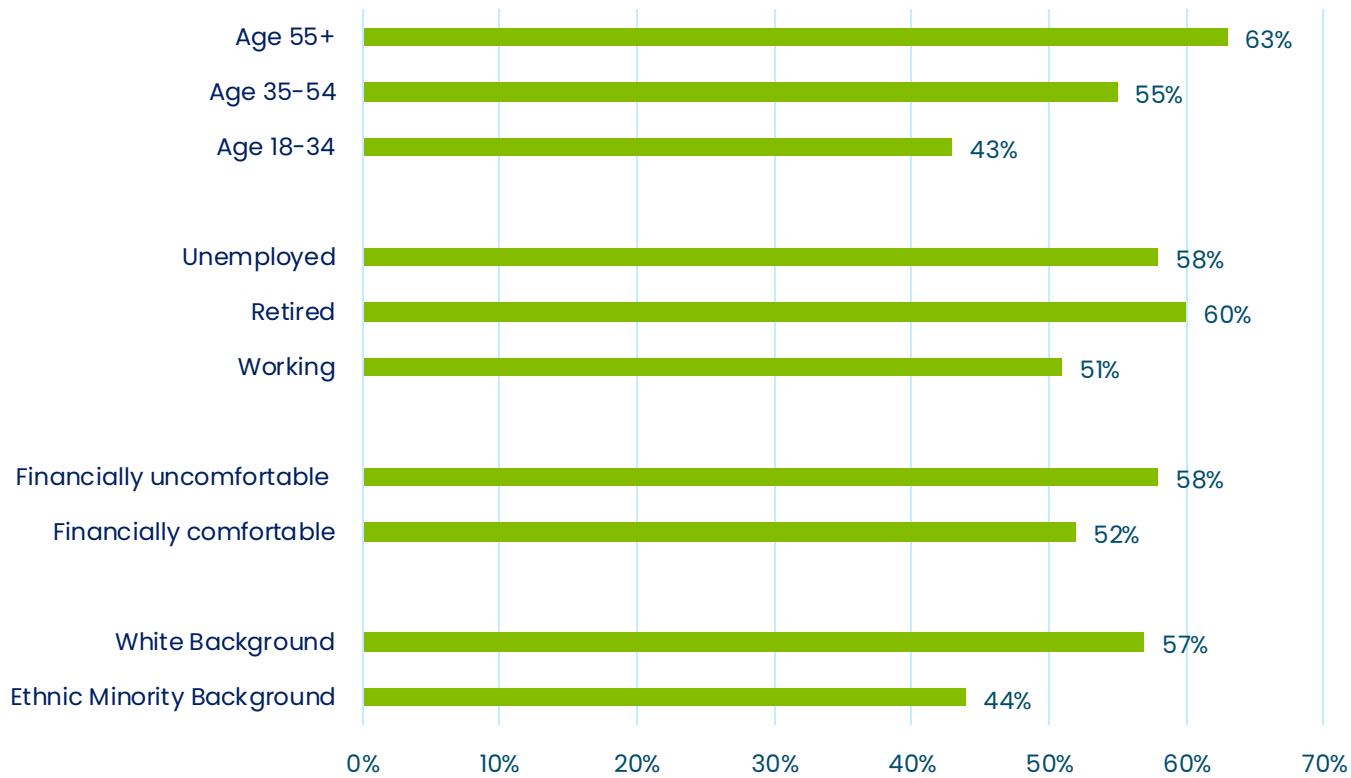
When asked which way of getting NHS dental care people would prefer in the future, the majority supported some type of registration for dentistry

(base: All respondents, 1,791, asked in September only)



How does this vary between different groups?

The graph below breaks down the percentage of people who chose “I want the ability to permanently register with a local NHS dentist in the same way I do with a GP surgery”



A photograph of a female dentist in a white lab coat and a white surgical mask, looking down and to the left. In the foreground, a large, white dental light fixture is visible, partially obscuring the view. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

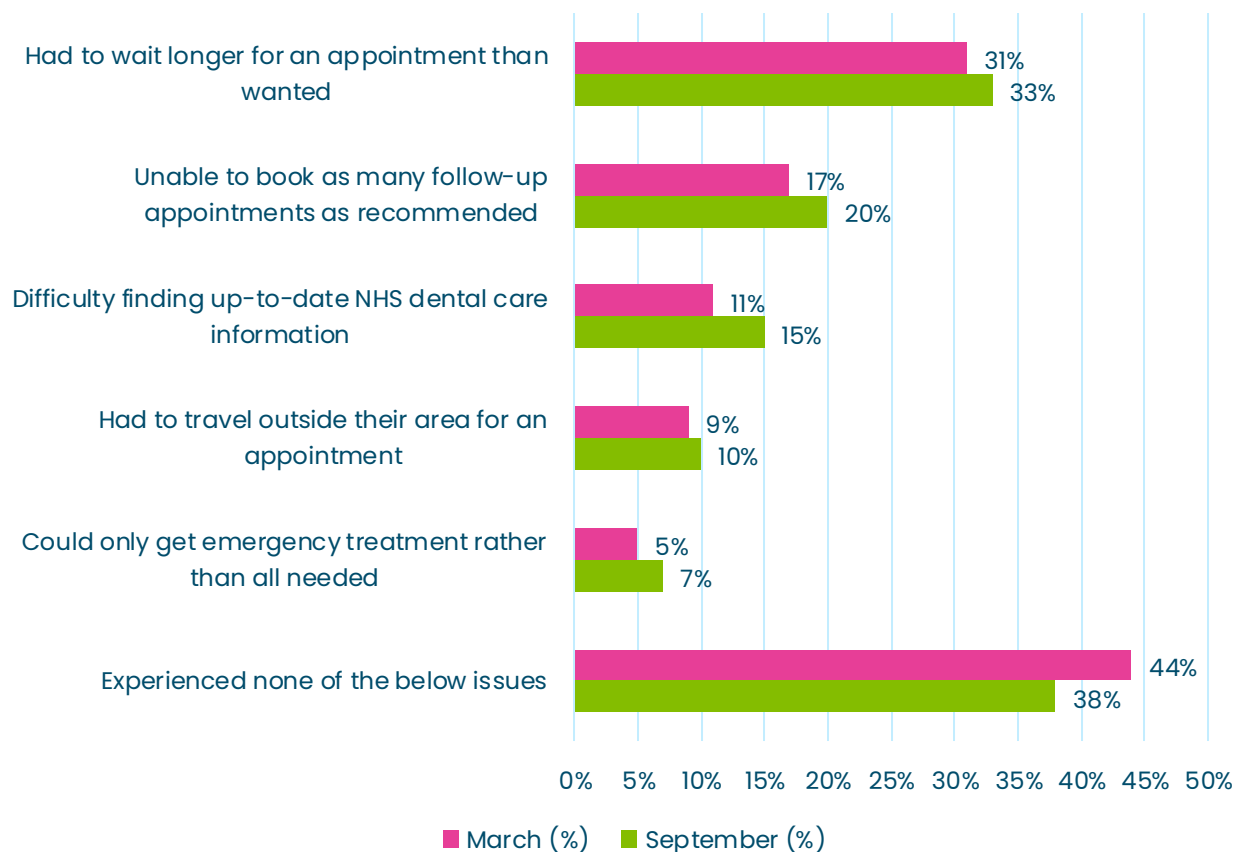
Theme 2:


**Experience of people who
could access an NHS dentist**

What did the polling tell us?

We asked: Thinking about your experience of NHS dental care in the last two years, have you...

Base: Those that have seen a dentist in the last two years March: 1,128; Sept:1,110





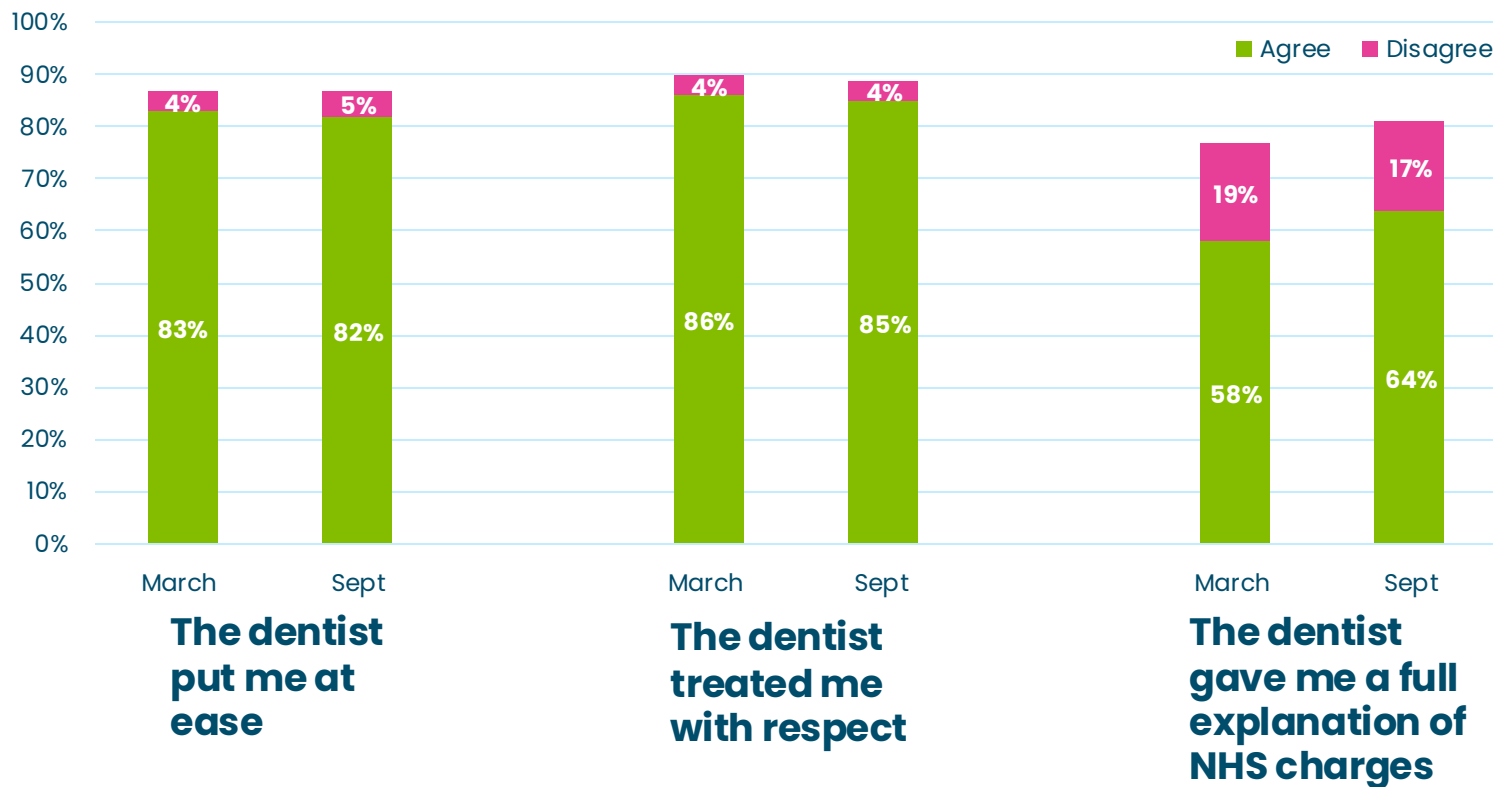
“I have been registered at the [name removed] Dental Care practice for over 50 years and I have always regularly had check-ups and treatment when necessary. I was notified by [the practice] in April this year that with effect from 1st August the practice was only offering Private Treatment Plans. I have been unable to find a dentist in South Tyneside willing to accept me as an NHS patient.”

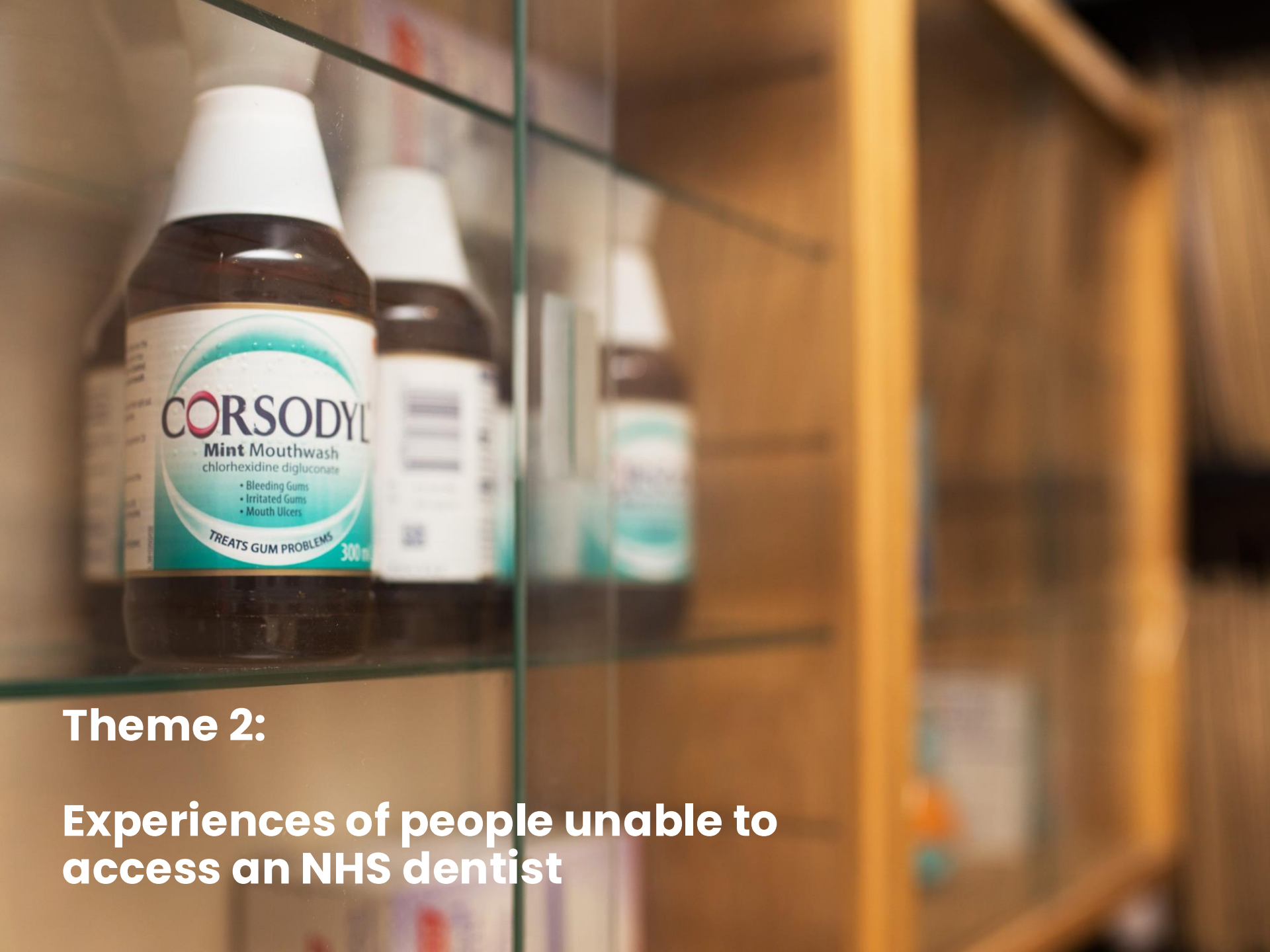
Story shared with Healthwatch South Tyneside



Thinking about the last appointment that you had with an NHS dentist, to what extent, if any, do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Base: Those that have seen a dentist in the last two years, March: 1128; Sept:1110



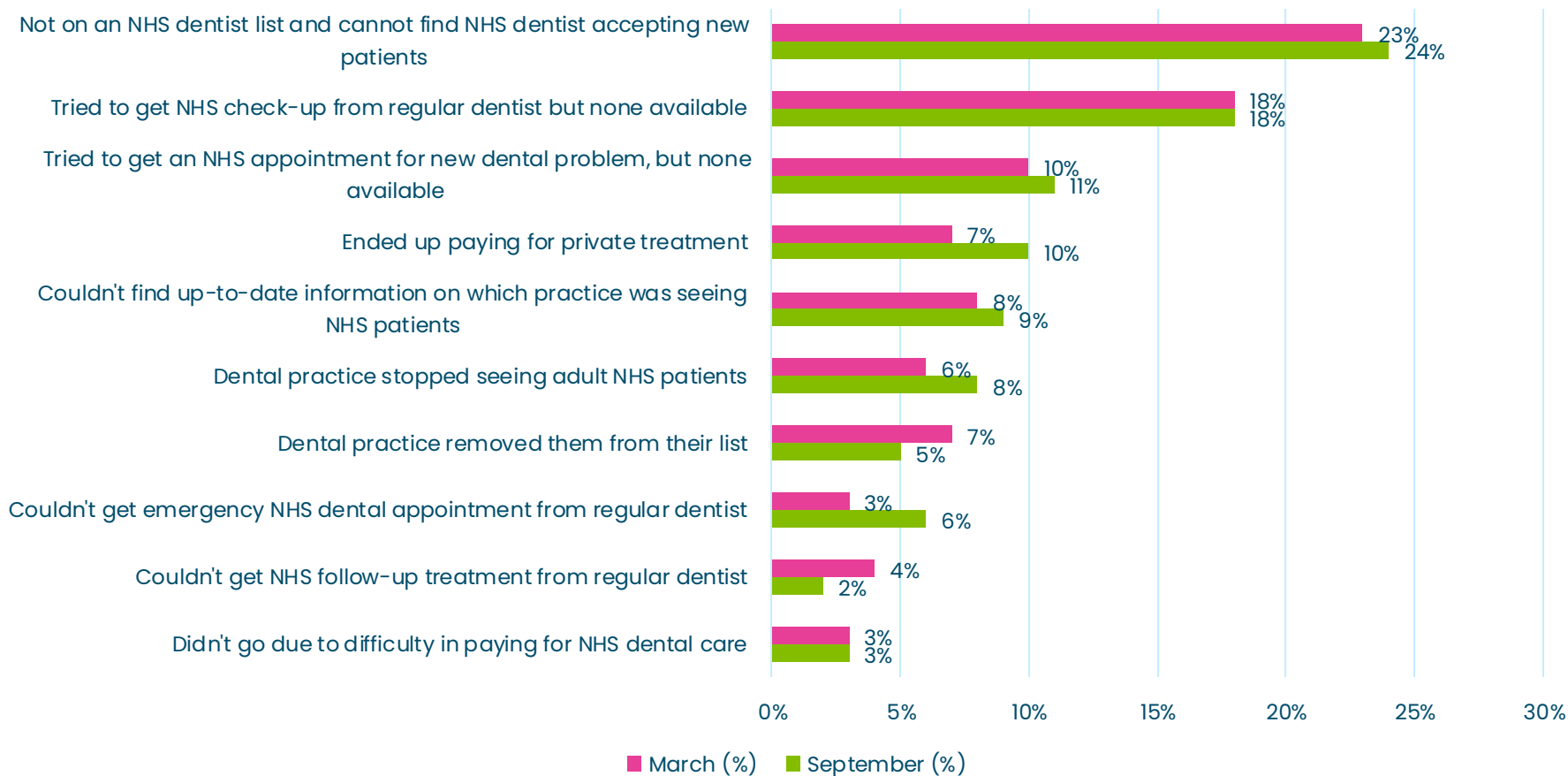


Theme 2:

Experiences of people unable to access an NHS dentist

We asked: what was the main reason people could not get an NHS dentist appointment in the last two years:

Base: Those unable to get a dental appointment in last two years, March 319; Sept 286





Due to a long-term health condition and disability, they were unable to visit the dentist for 2 years and the dental practice terminated their treatment.

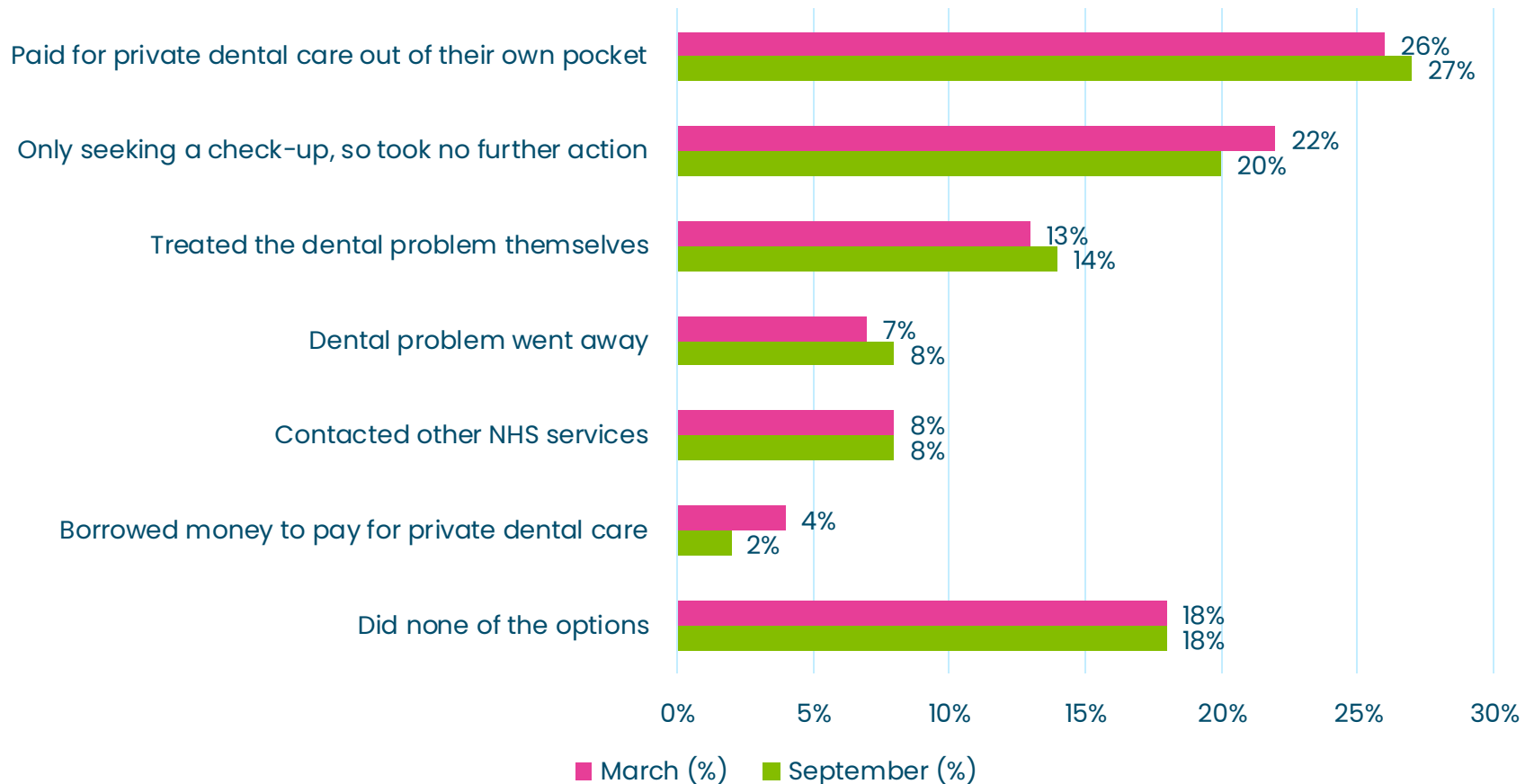
They have gone through the NHS 'find a dentist' list and called the dentists that suggest they have space, or even the ones who are close by who say they don't have space, with no success.


Story shared with Healthwatch Bristol



What did people do next after not getting an NHS dental appointment?

Base: Those unable to get a dental appointment in last two years, March 319; Sept 286





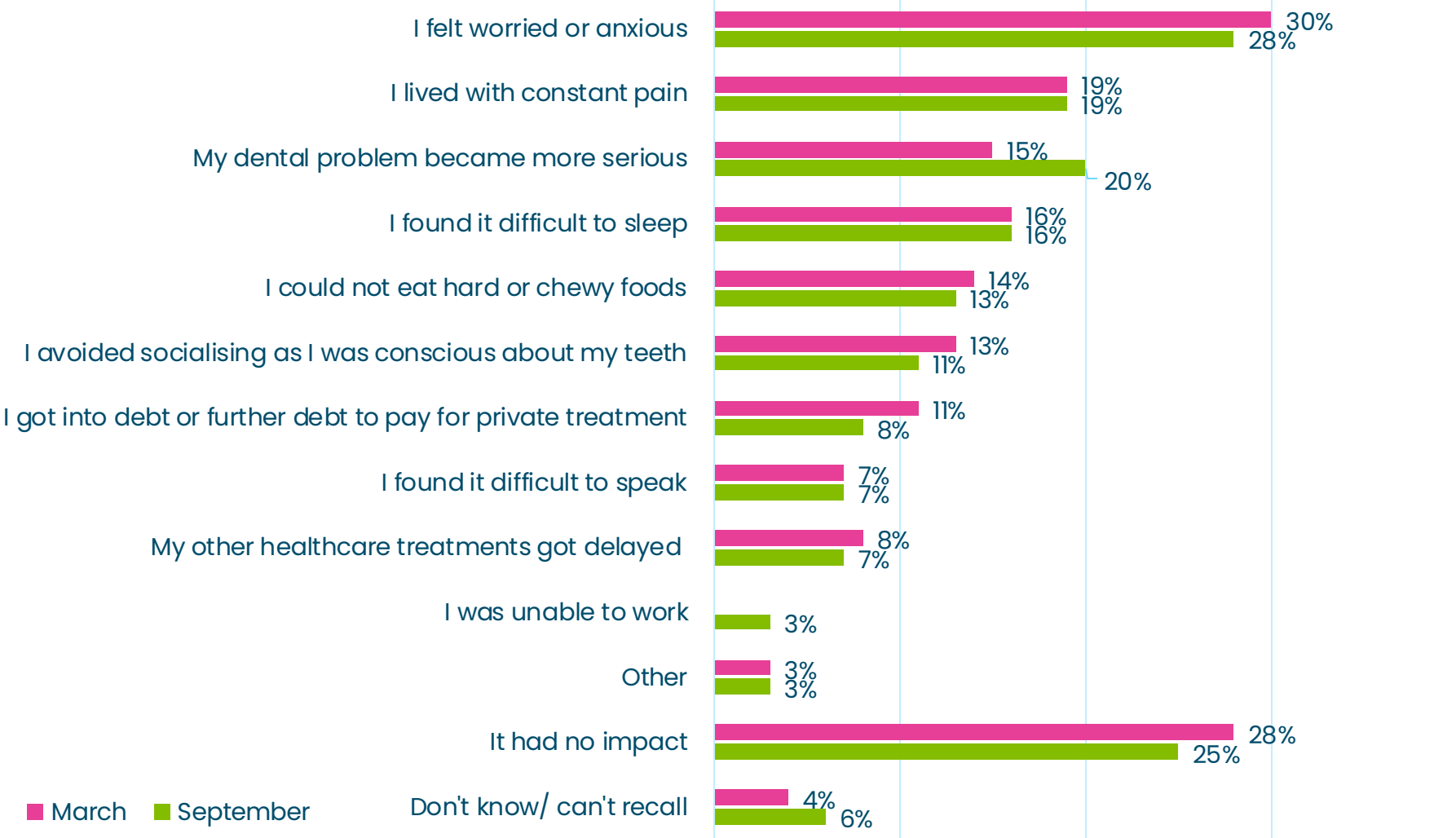
I have been unable to find an NHS dentist for the last 10 years. I have had to go privately but on an off-peak plan but my last 2 dentists ..were both taken over and increased prices dramatically making me move on each time

Story shared with Healthwatch Brighton and Hove



The impact of not getting NHS dental care

Base: Those unable to get a dental appointment in last two years, March 319; Sept 286





Since lockdown ended, I've been trying to find a dentist accepting new NHS patients. Unfortunately, no result.

Since then, the condition of my teeth has deteriorated rapidly (four of my teeth are cracked flush with the gums, with further holes visible to the naked eye, bleeding gums and recurring jaw pain that prevents me from functioning normally).

I have to blend most of my meals because I can't chew them.

Story shared with Healthwatch Gloucestershire



The NHS logo is displayed in blue and white on a white sign. The background of the entire image is a street scene with a red double-decker bus, a bus stop, and a white van.

DENTIST

TEL:

020 7582 1668

**Emergency
Appointment
Available**

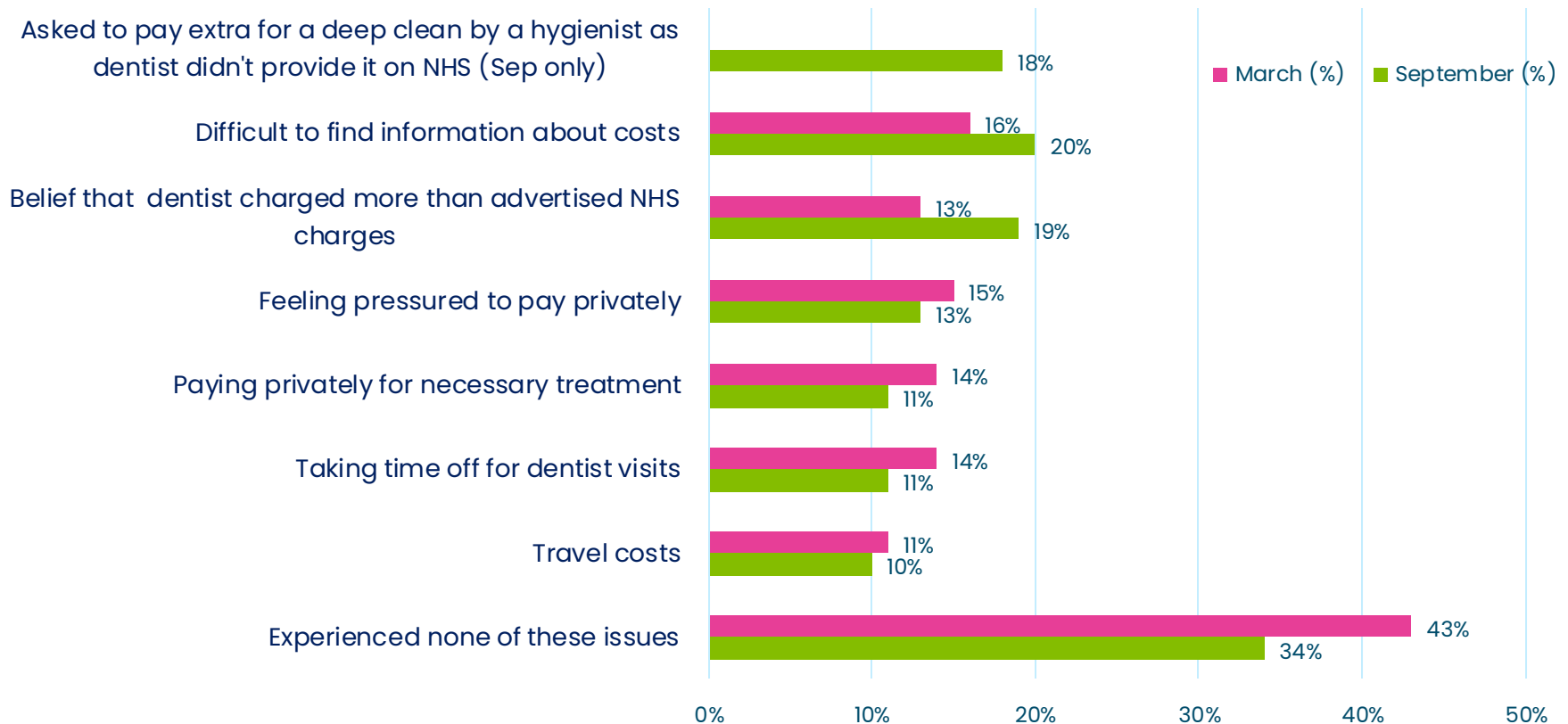
**New Patients
Welcome**


Theme 3:

**Views or experiences on
NHS dental costs**


Thinking about any costs associated with NHS dental care during the last two years, which, if any, of the following statements applies to you?

Base: Those that have seen a dentist in the last two years, March: 1128, Sept: 1110





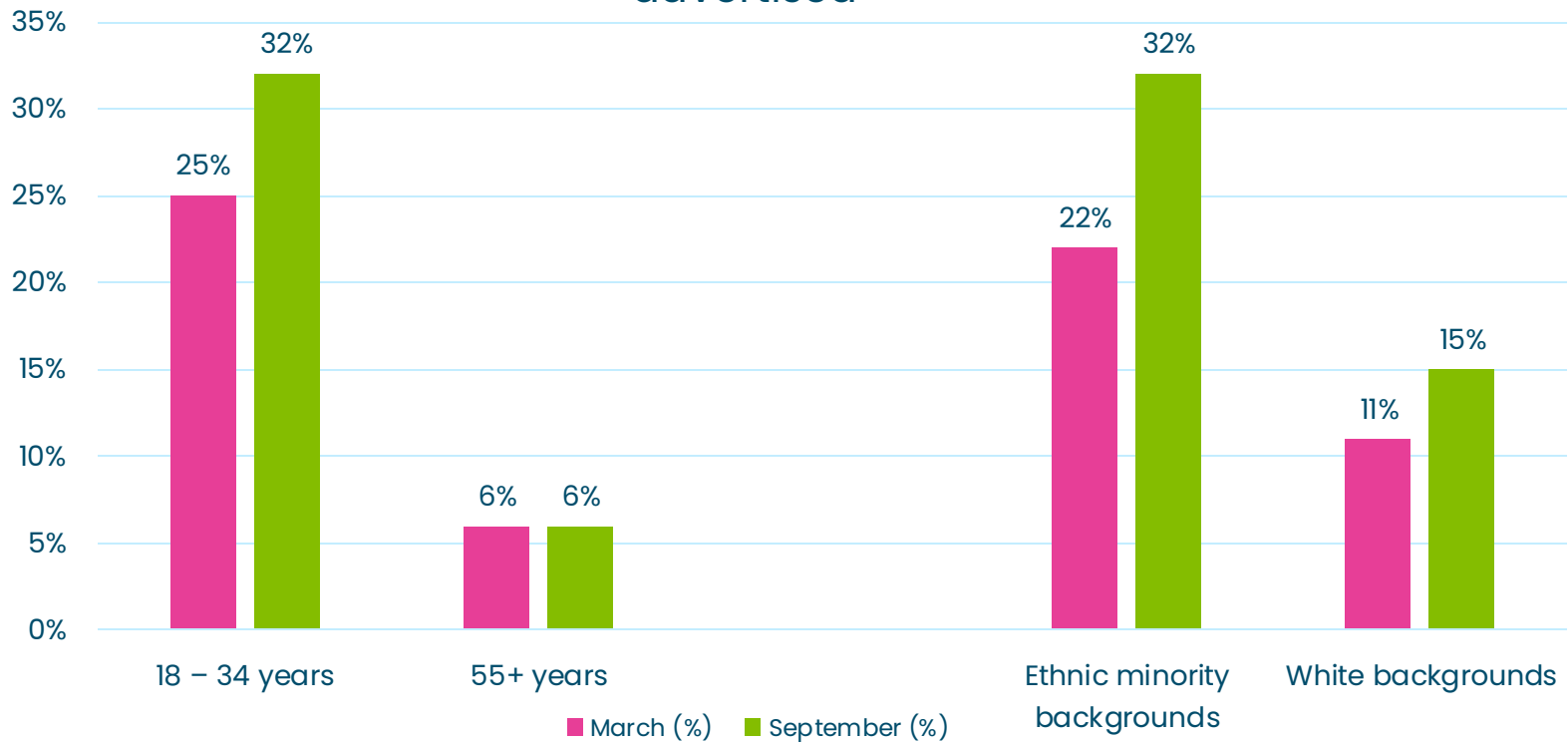
I'm on a benefits and can access free dental treatment because of this. I was sent an appointment for a scale and polish which the dentist has done for many years, this time it was the dental nurse, and I was told that they would be doing it from now on. After the appointment they charged me £58 and told that this is no longer a free treatment. However, no one told us this beforehand and it was a lot of money to find. Charges should be made clear before any treatment/appointments as if I'd known I wouldn't have gone.



Story shared with Healthwatch Lancashire

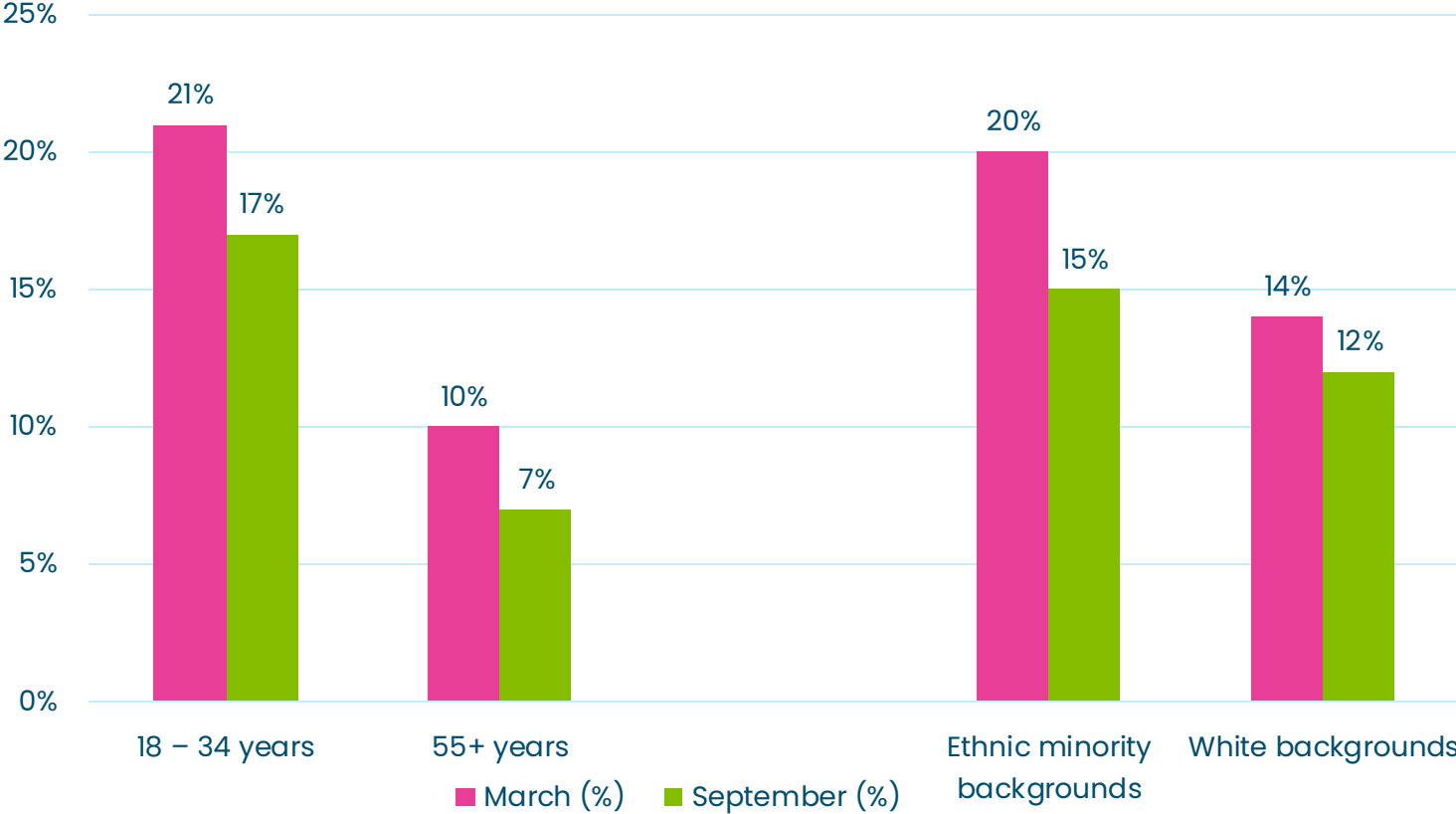
Demographic breakdown:

Young people and people from an ethnic minority background were significantly more likely to believe NHS dentists charged them more for the treatments than advertised



Demographic breakdown:

Feeling pressure to pay privately also varied significantly by age, and ethnic background



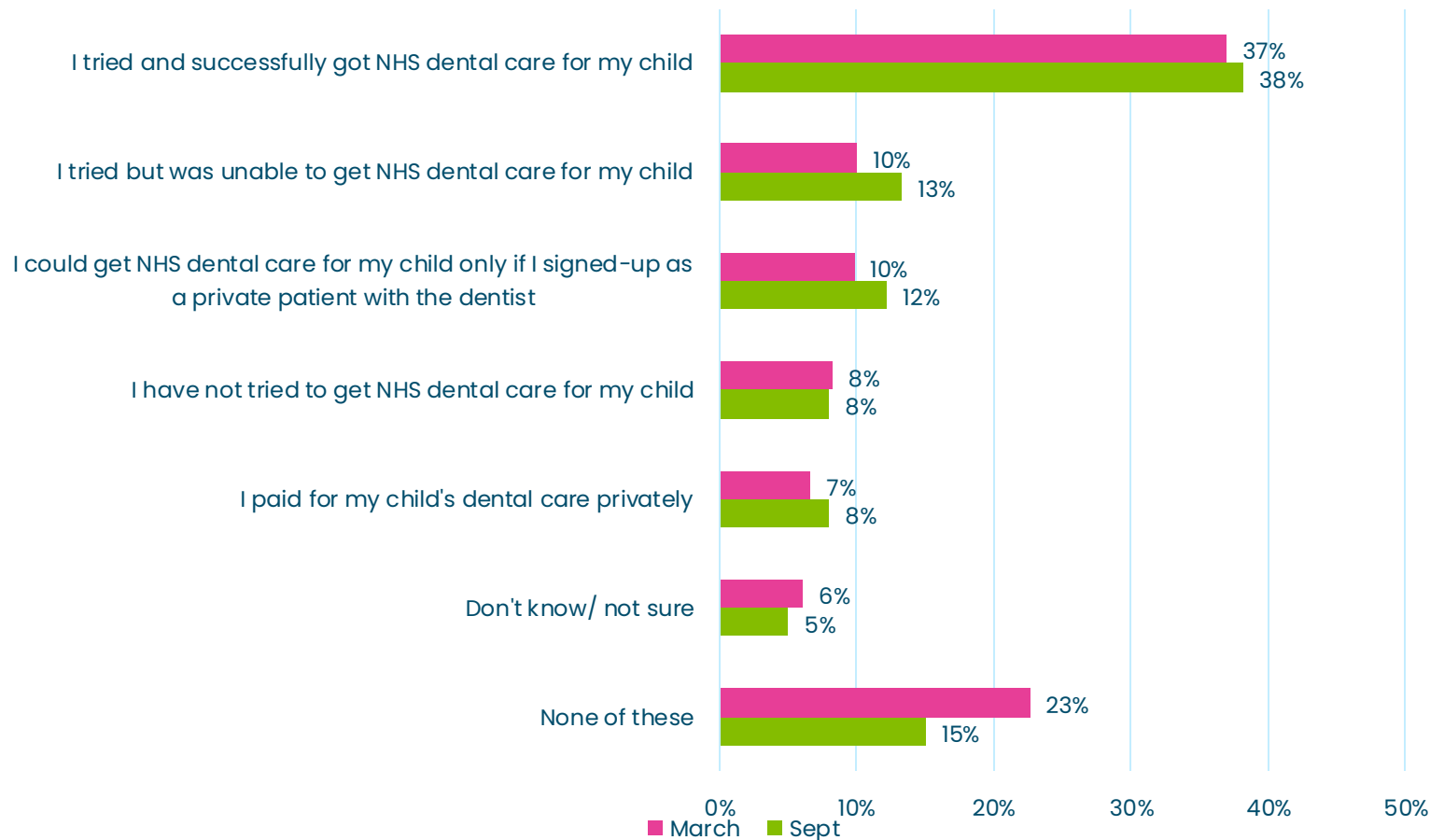


Theme 4:

Views or experiences on getting children seen by an NHS dentist

We asked about access to NHS dentistry for children under 18:

Base (all respondents with children U18)
March 883; Sept 836)



What Healthwatch heard from families and parents

While lots of feedback we heard regarding family care was extremely positive, some parents reported being told they had to register as private patients before their children can access NHS care. The poll also suggests this is an issue that is not going away, with the percentage reporting this increasingly slightly from March to September.

We heard from single parents facing difficulties accessing urgent dental treatment, as they balance dental appointments with childcare responsibilities, and have to rejoin waitlists when appointments have been missed.

Parents of children with learning difficulties and/or a disabilities report long waiting periods for essential dental treatment where adjustments are required.

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Child has ADHD and sometimes doesn't want to go to the dentist when we are booked in, so I have to cancel the appointment. This happened a couple of times and now we have been told they are no longer on the NHS register.

Story shared with Healthwatch Warwickshire



What do these polls tell us?

- The polling suggests NHS dental access remains stagnant for the public despite a new payment incentive introduced in March for dentists.
- Satisfaction with care from individual dentists remained high.
- The proportion of people who reported their dental issue had become more serious in the absence of NHS care, increased.
- There were also a slightly higher proportion of people who felt unable to get up-to-date information on dental charges.
- There was a worrying, albeit small, number of respondents who said their dentist would only see their child as an NHS patient if the parent became a private patient.
- The September poll only, showed the public's misconception about how 'registration' works in dentistry and indicated that most people would favour a GP-style system in the future.

Our recommendations

- The government to fundamentally reform NHS dentistry to give everyone a GP-style right to be permanently registered with a dental practice, to get check-ups and urgent care when needed.
- The government to consult with the public, as well as dental leaders, on proposals for long-term reform of NHS dentistry.
- NHS England and the government to publish an evaluation of the new patient payment introduced in March this year for dentists.
- Practices to communicate any policies they have on minimum visits required in set periods, to be kept on as a regular patient.
- NHS England and dental commissioners to improve public awareness of how the NHS dental system works, to help people plan for alternative care if their practice opts out of NHS work.
- Dental practices to provide clear information about charges.
- NHSE to remind dentists that it is a breach of contract to require parents join as private patients in order to see children on the NHS.

For more information

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