



Norfolk Armed Forces Covenant

Case Study: Norfolk Armed Forces Covenant – improving access to NHS Dental Treatment for dependants at RAF Marham and Robertson Barracks

1. Identifying the Issue

- 1.1. In 2016, the annual needs assessment by the community support team at RAF Marham, highlighted access to NHS dental treatment as a key issue for families.
- 1.2. Factors contributing to the issue included:
 - the rural nature of the Base,
 - lack of public transport, especially to facilitate a journey that would fit with school pick up / drop off times,
 - lack of access to private transport (including the inability to drive),
 - inaccessibility of dental facilities on the Base for dependents (these were only available to serving personnel),
 - difficulties gaining a place at a local NHS practice,
 - length of waiting times for an appointment.
- 1.3. At the time RAF Marham represented the largest military unit in Norfolk, with 2200 service personnel and 4500 dependants based there. A planned expansion to the Base to accommodate the new F35 was also set to make Marham home to Naval as well as RAF families.
- 1.4. 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards based at Robertson Barracks (Swanton Morley), also raised concerns with seeking NHS dental treatment.
- 1.5. Evidence gathered by Healthwatch Norfolkⁱ in 2013, highlighted accessing NHS dental treatment in Norfolk as an area of concern. Contributing factors included long waiting lists, frequently cancelled appointments and the distance required to travel for rural communities.
- 1.6. The GP Patient Survey which reports on a section about NHS dentistry, continually showed findings that experiences of NHS dental services in West Norfolk were much lower than the other four Clinical Commissioning Group areas in Norfolk (Ipsos Mori, 2017). Whilst data showed this was the case, it did not reveal the reasons behind the low overall experience.

2. Establishing the evidence

- 2.1. Norfolk's Armed Forces Covenant's (NAFC) first action was to bring the issues being experienced by the serving community to the attention of Healthwatch Norfolk in early 2017.
- 2.2. This, along with anecdotal evidence emerging from the civilian population led to access to NHS dental services for children and young people in West Norfolk being identified as one of Healthwatch Norfolk's three priority projects for 2017/18.
- 2.3. Children and young people were specifically chosen as the focus for this work as a reflection of the importance of prevention and issues raised in Norfolk's Healthy Child programme, which highlighted concerns with the dental health of children in the county. This was particularly highlighted in West Norfolk due to low fluoridation levels in the water supply, putting children at greater risk of tooth decay and associated ill health as well as rising rates of tooth extraction required due to poor dental hygiene.
- 2.4. NAFC's first step was to design an on-line survey, in partnership with Healthwatch Norfolk to provide families at RAF Marham and Robertson Barracks with an opportunity to highlight their experiences. In parallel, Healthwatch Norfolk conducted a similar survey with the civilian population as well as mystery shopping with NHS dental practices to determine the accuracy of information being published on NHS Choices and their own websites as well as the availability of appointments.
- 2.5. Survey findings from RAF Marham and Robertson Barracks, showed that 74 out of the 216 service dependants who responded were not registered with any form of dental care. Of those who were registered 22 were on a private basis. 112 respondents reported having to travel over 10 miles to access a service and that the lack of a frequent bus service from both localities meant that getting to appointments, particularly with young children was disruptive to dependents and serving personnel who in some cases were the only person able to drive / with access to a car. Families also reported issues with a lack of continuity in care as dental records were not passed from one dentist to another.
- 2.6. The survey received 314 responses from parents/guardians in the civilian population equating to 606 children and young people. This showed that 66% (209) took their children to the dentist every six months and a further 14% (44) took them every year. 15% (47) said their children had never visited the dentist for the following reasons: availability of NHS services, age of children, quality of services and cancellations of appointments. This also revealed questions about the consistency of information being given to parents about the age at which a child should begin visiting a dentist.
- 2.7. The survey revealed clear issues with availability of services in West Norfolk but showed that people were generally happy with the service they received when able to access NHS dental care.
- 2.8. The mystery shopping exercise showed that only four out of thirteen dental practices were accepting children at the time, one of which would only accept

children as NHS patients if their parent/guardian was at the practice as a private patient. Of the four dental practices accepting children, the earliest available appointment was in June/July 2018, with the longest wait being until August 2018.

2.9. Following conclusion of the survey, the resulting report was taken to Norfolk Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee ⁱⁱ(NHOSC) who invited representatives from the relevant NHS Commissioning team to discuss the survey findings. This resulted in an agreement that access to NHS dental treatment in West Norfolk was insufficient and that improvements should be sought as a matter of urgency.

3. Exploring the options

3.1. Throughout 2016/17 the Norfolk Armed Forces Covenant, in partnership with the OC Base and the community support team at RAF Marham, explored a number of options to improve access to NHS dental treatment for families. These included:

- Use of a room / space for a visiting NHS dentist to deliver a set amount of surgeries.
- Payment for a mobile dental unit and associated staff.
- Purchase of a mobile dental unit to provide space for an NHS dental practice.
- Use of existing dental facilities on the Base 'out of hours' by enabling access to facilities by an NHS dental practice.

3.2. Following extensive research, the only viable option was deemed to be payment for a mobile dentistry service to be positioned 'outside the wire' to facilitate families and civilians access the service.

3.3. NAFC conducted research to determine if it was possible to access a mobile service in Norfolk. This showed that despite being a rural county, no such service had been commissioned by the NHS to operate in the county, unlike some London Boroughs. However, a company called Community Dental Services, a CIC based in Bedford, did operate a route to Thetford visiting local care homes.

3.4. NAFC arranged for Community Dental Services CIC to visit the Base to meet OC Base, Community Support and the Senior Dental Officer. The recommendation from this meeting was to conduct a trial involving 36 visits per year at a total cost of just over £33k. This solution would provide a basic 'check-up' for most families but refer more complex cases.

3.5. In 2017, to facilitate delivery of the recommendation, NAFC worked with the community support team at RAF Marham to write a bid to the Armed Forces Covenant Small Grants fund for £20k, along with a request to meet the shortfall from the RAF Benevolent Fund.

3.6. This funding bid was rejected on the grounds that this was an NHS service which they were obligated to provide.

4. The turning point

- 4.1. One of the main stumbling blocks for the project was a 'disconnect' between the perceived accessibility of NHS dental services at a regional level.
- 4.2. This was largely due to NHS commissioning and Covenant funding decisions both being made regionally and therefore not being completely reflective of the issues being faced at a local level, particularly for families of serving personnel located in West Norfolk.
- 4.3. Acknowledgement by NHS as a result of the work carried out by NAFC and Healthwatch Norfolk that dental provision was inadequate in this area was an important turning point for the project.
- 4.4. Despite being rejected, the funding bid also assisted in raising the profile of the issue amongst statutory services. It highlighted the potential for families to be disadvantaged when accessing dental treatment due to the unintended consequences of frequent moves combined with lengthy waiting lists and the lack of transport options for rural locations.
- 4.5. This helped to facilitate an informed discussion between NAFC and NHS dental commissioners which focused on the specific challenges faced by armed forces families living in West Norfolk.
- 4.6. Around the same time various news agencies including local BBC news and the Eastern Daily Press picked up on the issues being experienced by people trying to access NHS dental treatment in Norfolk. (see links at bottom of paper).

5. What the partnership achieved and how

- 5.1. Discussions throughout 2017/18 sought to determine how additional access to NHS dental services could be created.
- 5.2. The solution presented as creation of a new dental practice rather than expansion of an existing one in order to not only tackle the immediate issue but also provide some future resilience to the service.
- 5.3. The partnership between NAFC, RAF Marham, NHS and DIO was established in order to create the first NHS dental practice open to the civilian population occupying a building owned by the MOD.
- 5.4. Two areas of working practice formed the basis of enablement:
 - Developing an understanding of how a MOD owned building could be used to deliver an NHS service.
 - Attraction and identification of a potential dental provider.

6. Developing an understanding of how a MOD owned building could be used to deliver an NHS service.

6.1. NHS England provided RAF Marham with some details about what infrastructure would be required to support the provision of NHS dental services and it quickly became apparent that a 3-bedroom house would meet these requirements.

6.2. RAF Marham identified some spare capacity within the MOD housing stock; however, as the housing estate was not owned by the Station, RAF Marham could not provide NHS England with the necessary authority to utilise the vacant 3-bedroom house without the approval of the landlords, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO).

6.3. RAF Marham's proposal to use a MOD owned property to provide NHS dental services for dependants and the local community was both novel and contentious and was therefore initially met with a degree of resistance. However, the benefits of working with another government department to deliver vital services to Royal Air Force families were clear. Consequently, DIO, RAF Marham and NHS England agreed to work together to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles. The result was an agreement that allowed a NHS dentist to lease a vacant 3-bedroom property from the MOD to deliver essential dental services for RAF Marham families and the wider communities of West Norfolk.

7. Outcome

7.1. In 2020 the Marham Dental practice opened just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although this has meant restrictions on the way that the practice is operating it has been well received by the military and civilian community, with discussions about expansion already being muted.



Contact:

To learn more about the joint project please contact armedforcescovenant@norfolk.gov.uk

Notes:

Examples of relevant press Coverage

- EDP April 2019 <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/health/lack-of-nhs-dental-spaces-in-norfolk-1-5984714>
- EDP April 2019 <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/health/norfolk-health-meeting-discuss-access-to-dental-services-1-5991999>
- Kings Lynn FM <https://www.klfm967.co.uk/news/klfm-news/2659792/why-are-people-in-west-norfolk-choosing-private-dentists/>
- BBC News 2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-41113507>

Link to Healthwatch reports

- <https://healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/reports/published-reports/>

Link to NHOSC

- https://norfolkcc.cmis.uk.com/norfolkcc/Committees/tabid/62/ctl/ViewCMIS_CommitteeDetails/mid/381/id/22/Default.aspx

Link to Norfolk's Healthy Child Programme

- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/our-services/healthy-child-programme-services-5-19>

Link to GP Practice Survey

- <https://gp-patient.co.uk/About>

ⁱ [Healthwatch Norfolk - Home - Join the conversation](#)

ⁱⁱ [CMIS > Committees > Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#)