

Armed Forces Friendly General Practice and Dental Services

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Purpose

To update the Health Scrutiny Panel on how the NHS is meeting the responsibilities under the new amendments to the Armed Forces Act 2006.



1. **Background - The Armed Forces Covenant**

The Armed Forces Covenant reflects the moral obligation that exists between the Armed Forces and society. These principles are enshrined in law under the Armed Forces Act 2021.

The Covenant commitments

- The Armed Forces community should enjoy the same standard of, and access to healthcare as that received by any other UK citizen in the area they live.
- Family members should retain their place on any NHS waiting list, if moved around the UK due to the service person being posted.
- Veterans should receive priority treatment for a condition which relates to their service, subject to clinical need.
- Those injured in service should be cared for in a way that reflects the nation's moral obligation to them, by healthcare professionals who understand the Armed Forces culture.

The Armed Forces Covenant is reflected in the NHS Constitution.

The Armed Forces Covenant creates a duty for certain public bodies, health, education, and housing, to have 'due regard' to the:

- unique obligations of and sacrifices made by the Armed Forces
- principle that it is desirable to remove the disadvantages arising from being a member of the Armed Forces community
- principle that special provision may be justified.

2. **General Practice Veteran Accreditation Scheme**

The Veteran Friendly Accreditation Scheme is a programme run by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and NHS England.

The Veteran Friendly GP Practice accreditation scheme supports practices to deliver the best possible care and treatment for veterans who have served in the UK Armed Forces and their families.

Veteran friendly GP practices will have access to a range of veteran specific NHS services and resources.

Accreditation sends an important signal to veteran patients and their families about inclusion and improves experiences and health outcomes for veterans.

What does the scheme aim do:

- The scheme helps GP practices to identify, code and support their veteran patients, which is important as the healthcare needs of veterans can be different to the general population.
- Accredited practices appoint a clinical lead who receives training and support and receives an information pack to help increase their understanding of the health needs of veterans, and the services available to them.
- The information pack provides practices with a simple process for the easy identification of veteran patients, information on how to refer to specialist veteran healthcare services such as
 - Op COURAGE: The Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service
 - Op RESTORE: The Veterans Physical Health and Wellbeing Service,
 - Op NOVA: Supporting Veterans in the Justice System, and
 - advice on how to secure priority access for veteran patients, subject to clinical need.

Devon General Practice uptake:

Devon is the largest ICB across the Southwest, uptake is good (84% overall uptake). Out of 117 practices 99 are signed up to the scheme. The remaining 18 practices will continue to be encouraged to sign up. Only 45 practices were accredited 2 years ago.

3. Dental Services

Overview of NHS Dentistry:

Access to NHS dentistry is a recognised challenge nationally; on 7th February 2024, the NHS and Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) published “A Joint Plan” to recover and reform access to NHS dental care. This plan is an important next step in improving patient access to NHS dental care and supporting dental services to return to pre-pandemic levels of activity.

Dental practices are independent businesses, often providing a combination of NHS and private dentistry. Patients are not registered with a dentist in the same way they are with a General Practitioner (Doctor), and individuals can access services at a dental practice located in any area if the practice is accepting new patients.

It is important to note that military families are also included within the Armed Forces Covenant, and the transient addresses of the military and their families can have an impact on access to NHS dentistry. Though families can legitimately still see a dentist in their previous posting location, due to distances involved this is not always feasible. The ideal situation is for these individuals to access NHS dental care in their local area.

Local Plans and Services:

NHS Devon is working in partnership with the NHS Southwest Collaborative Commissioning Hub (CCH) and local dental and oral healthcare professionals to develop and progress its local Dental Recovery Plan. The plan sets out to address the issues facing the sector and improve access to dental services for all local people.

A key priority for Devon is to increase access to NHS dentistry by implementing measures to support dental services such as increased UDA rates (units of dental activity) and targeting inequality groups, as well as increase the recruitment and retention of the dental workforce.

NHS Devon are committed to procuring new general dental activity in 2025-26.

The current financial envelope in Devon is tied up in existing contracts; not all of these current providers are achieving their contracted levels of NHS activity. NHS Devon are actively looking to rebase existing contracts to achievable levels in order to free up this funding to commission more activity and support financial sustainability within the sector.

As we are enabled, through this rebasing process, to invest in new contracts, our priority is to explore the opportunities within flexible commissioning, inside the nationally set regulations, to provide care for specific patient populations, for example those residing in areas of known deprivation and children. We are keen, over time, to use this process to address other groups which may require additional support, such as people experiencing homelessness and veterans.

Currently, NHS Devon do commission specialist community dental services for those who may not be able to attend a general dental practice.

These include people with various mental, medical and physical needs – for instance:

- children with extensive untreated tooth decay who are particularly anxious
- children in foster homes or residential care, or on the ‘at risk’ register
- people with physical or learning disabilities, medical conditions or mental health problems
 - children referred for specific treatment
 - adults with complex needs who have difficulty accessing general dental services, including adults with moderate and severe learning and physical disabilities or
 - housebound and people experiencing homelessness.

In Devon, this service is provided by the Salaried Dental Service (Exeter), Plymouth Community Dental Service and Torbay Community Dental Service.

All patients with an urgent dental need can call NHS 111 who will put them in touch with an urgent care dental service.