

Big Mouth Tower Hamlets: Shaping Oral Health Priorities through Community Conversations



Oral health is increasingly recognised not just as the absence of disease, but as a crucial factor affecting a person's ability to speak, eat, socialise, and live without pain or shame. However, oral health research remains narrowly focused on disease outcomes, often overlooking the wider social and cultural factors that influence well-being.

This disconnect is particularly clear in areas like the London borough of Tower Hamlets, where oral health outcomes are among the poorest in the UK, yet communities across the borough remain underrepresented in shaping the research agendas meant to benefit them. Residents report being viewed as passive recipients of health services rather than partners in the production of knowledge.

The **Big Mouth Tower Hamlets** project aimed to reverse this dynamic by promoting a participatory and inclusive approach to oral health research that prioritises the voices of Tower Hamlets residents – especially those from seldom heard communities – in setting future research priorities. The project was a partnership between Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) researchers and Social Action for Health, a local health charity, funded by QMUL's Centre for Public Engagement.

Oral health is a **big** topic;
it's not just about teeth.
It includes eating, smiling,
speaking, interacting with
other people and your
appearance.



The Big Mouth Tower Hamlets project had four key aims through which the research team aimed to move from a deficit-based to an asset-based model of oral health research.

1 Documenting community perspectives

Gathering insights from Tower Hamlets about the oral health topics and questions that mattered most to them, particularly those that promote well-being rather than just address disease.

2 Fostering dialogue and partnership

Creating a structured space for mutual exchange between residents and QMUL researchers, enabling interdisciplinary collaboration and the co-creation of research priorities.

3 Amplifying local voices

Giving residents a platform to shape the future of oral health research through conversation, storytelling, and creative expression.

4 Building sustainable engagement

Laying the groundwork for future participatory research initiatives that reflect community values and priorities, and that lead to actionable change both in research practices and in local oral health outcomes.

Through these aims, the project intended to develop a more equitable, responsive, and impactful approach to health research that genuinely benefits the Tower Hamlets community.

At the centre of the project were a series of innovative “body maps” around which conversations and dialogues flowed. Body mapping is a visual and narrative technique in which participants create life-sized representations of their bodies, using symbols, text, and imagery to express personal experiences, emotions, and meanings related to health and well-being.

In the Big Mouth Tower Hamlets project, the body maps became a powerful medium for exploring oral health as a lived, embodied experience rather than a purely clinical issue. Participants located dental pain, shame, pride, or resilience on the body and connected these personal experiences to external and environmental factors that also shape oral health.

Body mapping enabled more inclusive and meaningful participation from individuals who might not have engaged through conventional discussion formats, empowering participants to share rich and layered data to inform future research questions and priorities.



Too much sugar. Too much junk food.

Dental costs on a lower income. £££

What we did

Four different engagement approaches captured diverse community voices by partnering with volunteer and community sector organisations and by using social media and community networks. We hosted a **Big Mouth Open Conversation** co-facilitated with Social Action for Health using our body map to guide the mini conversations. These round table discussions explored:

What people's mouth meant to them

How the mouth affected their health and the rest of their body

The impact of wider social and environment factors such as access to health services, their living environment and friends and families

English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners from English for Action (Efa) shared their ideas in a special **Big Mouth Conversation** as part of their classroom session. Efa is a London charity that aims to empower migrants to gain practical language skills by discussing concerns and critical health and social issues that affect their daily lives such as racism, discrimination and barriers to accessing health services. Capturing the experiences of this seldom-heard group revealed fascinating insights about cultural and language barriers, the differences between their UK and home country experiences, their encounters with local dentists and how they supported their children's oral health.



Our **Big Mouth conversations** and body maps helped people to think more broadly about the topics, questions, and ideas that they felt researchers at QMUL should focus on addressing in our research and teaching to improve the oral health of people living in Tower Hamlets.



We held an online **Big Mouth conversation** for people who preferred to take part remotely. Our online participants heard about the feedback from the online survey and Big Mouth Open conversations. They then shared their comments on a real-time online discussion board.

People also shared their ideas in the **Big Mouth online survey** where they could suggest questions, provide comments and share images (photovoice). The survey also asked about what our dental students (who are training to be future dentists) should know about the local community.

What factors outside of the body affect a person's mouth?

Cost of dental treatment

Jobs can help you pay for dental treatment - insurance

Family can remind you about dental visits

We commissioned Isolde Godfrey (a Hackney-based artist and Creative Director for Woven Ink) to create a Big Mouth Tower Hamlets mural, visually capturing the rich insights shared in the Big Mouth Conversations using virtual minutes.



The Big Mouth Tower Hamlets Conversations

Shaping Oral Health Priorities through community conversations



Aim: to capture the questions that people think we should focus our research and teaching on to improve the oral health of people in Tower Hamlets



the mouth is connected to the rest of the body

1 What does your mouth mean to you?

many factors that impact your oral health... so let's start with...

my toddler exploring taste & texture

having a smile not to be embarrassed of...

it links to everything

breathing... laughing... shouting... smoking... talking... chewing... eating... smiling... with a clean mouth you feel confident... a reflection of health... mental health

bringing hard stuff like nuts, all types of food...

chewing

my mouth is my life line

how you show emotion... the index of my mind...

it is the gateway to community... connection... people...




4 What questions & topics should researchers at the dental school look at to help people living in Tower Hamlets improve the health of their mouth?

Support parents to support children's oral health

bring schools & parents together to collaborate... high sugar diets in children

what causes crooked teeth?

how to make healthy lifestyle more accessible... dental students go into schools

I want a community event... awareness // workshops

visual aids people can take home

videos

Supporting English Speakers of Other Languages

I've been waiting for treatment for so long!

toothbrushing & self care

in the UK people are taught better how to clean... I think in Bangladesh we are less aware, educated...

Bad breath keep people away!

not all dentists accept adults & children

not being educated about flossing...

cosmetic treatments

social media influence

low nutrition at food banks.

biggest factor!

INGCOME

knowledge about Sugar

added sugars

fizzy drinks

healthy food is expensive

how do I find an NHS dentist?

holes in teeth

filings

to our dental treatment quicker!

we fly for country for cheaper

easier to speak our language

for children it's free so we stay here for them

I don't understand everything being said

what can I do to help me look after my teeth?

I want support with teaching my children how to brush

I'm not used to floss and I don't like it!

I'm too busy... tired!

have a duty & responsibility for my children but harder for myself

understanding = cultural = knowledge = education

sometimes it's scary

2 How does a person's mouth impact their body or health in general?

Smoking

gum problems

bad breath

if you have no teeth you have no taste!

you need to chew your food!

can impact your romantic relationships

Confidence

healthy body...

completeness of self...

GOOD HEART

when you're smiling people smile back...

lungs - pain - bleeding

infection

Suffering in Silence

DAILY FUNCTIONS!

MENTAL HEALTH

if family & friends have good oral health...

parents

Lifestyle

Education

teaching in schools...

food & diet

added sugars

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3 What wider factors affect a person's mouth?

HOW YOU GREW UP!

if family & friends have good oral health...

parents

Lifestyle

Education

teaching in schools...

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What people in Tower Hamlets told us

We identified four common themes that people said we should focus our research and teaching on at the dental school, based on the information shared by participants in the Big Mouth Conversations and online survey.



We discussed and shared the areas and themes with community participants, researchers at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), and stakeholders during the **Big Mouth Crosstalk** feedback event to gather their feedback and explore potential actions and research focuses.

The next section provides a snapshot of the Big Mouth questions that people suggested as research priorities, including examples of direct quotes and comments from the online survey and Big Mouth conversations covering the four themes.

Food, diet, sugar, oral health, and general health

People wanted more information and had specific questions about which foods to eat to enhance their oral and general health. They recognised food insecurity as a challenge faced by families struggling to afford healthy foods on limited budgets.

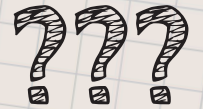
Big Mouth Questions

What do Tower Hamlets residents typically eat and how does that impact their health?

How does diet (sugar consumption) impact oral health in Tower Hamlets?

How does having good oral health influence other parts of your body?

What factors determine the purchase of food that affects tooth decay? e.g. advertising suggesting it is healthy, or a treat that you deserve, or it is cool/fun? Cheaper and/or more convenient than alternatives? Peer pressure?



Food/diet-junk food leads to poor diet and major health problems like diabetes, cholesterol and obesity

More awareness about sugar in foods - added or natural sugars.

Education on how to improve diet and oral health on a budget

It is a poor area, I know because I live here. I wasn't in a good financial place and having four young children. I understand that you don't always have a lot of money to feed a family, but sweets/cakes are sometimes cheaper than a healthy alternative.

The importance of what foods are good for you but not necessarily for your teeth. No sweet stuff for breakfast. The amount of children I see daily with sweets for breakfast!

People in Tower Hamlets eat unhealthy and drink a lot of fizzy drinks and eat sweets



Access to NHS dentists

Our participants shared their experiences and challenges in finding and accessing NHS dentists in Tower Hamlets. Most of their questions concerned information about NHS dentistry, including entitlements and misunderstandings about registering with dentists. The cost of NHS dental treatment was also a barrier.

The crisis of the lack of dentists and appointments is affecting people financially and mentally.

Many people in Tower Hamlets may not visit the dentist regularly due to cost concerns, lack of awareness, or difficulty booking NHS appointments. Understanding why people do not seek preventive care and identifying ways to improve service delivery can help address this issue.

Income - Money impacts wait time for dentists. If in pain, you have to use more money. More regular check-ups.

The dentist should listen to our concerns and help us find solution. Often it is hard to get treatment immediately because so many things need to be referred, and the patient is still in pain all the while

Most local people want access to an NHS dentist for treatment of pain and infection, fillings, gum treatment, etc. rather than a private practice heavily advertising "cosmetic" treatments. We wonder why students are studying Dentistry if they don't want to treat most of the people who need their care for the sake of general health. Is this covered in their Ethics course?

Dental services - hard to get dental advice when you need it. Registering with a dentist is very difficult.



A lot of young people in Tower Hamlets are not accessing dentists and the barriers to them rejoining a dental practice. NHS dentists' spaces are few and far between.

Big Mouth Questions

Why aren't there enough NHS dentist places in Tower Hamlets?

Why are dentists oversubscribed? They have no space to look after adult patients and most are becoming privatised.

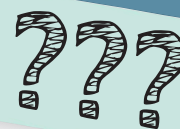
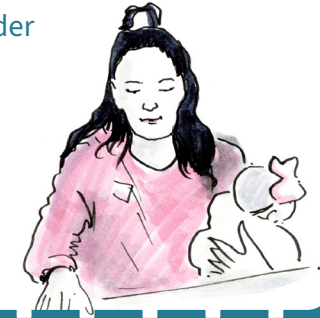
What are the problems that prevent residents from accessing dental care?

Price has also increased for the people who are paying hence this will affect them going regularly to the dentist so maybe look at that.

When should a child register with a dentist?

What are we entitled to under dental care?

Why do dentists in Tower Hamlets refuse to do extractions or dentures?



Raising awareness and increasing community knowledge about preventing dental diseases

Oral health was an important aspect of people's lives. Participants felt that more action could be taken to raise community awareness about oral health, particularly about cultural practices such as betel and tobacco chewing and mouth cancer. They believed that research could focus on expanding knowledge about how to prevent dental diseases through culturally sensitive and community-led education approaches. They also noted a lack of public involvement and community discussion related to dental and oral health research.

Hidden sugars!
Educate about foods with sugars in them, fizzy drinks, proper brushing important.

Promoting good oral hygiene through education and access to dental care is essential.

Big Mouth Questions

What is the level of oral health awareness among Tower Hamlets residents?

How do you promote good oral health and hygiene to the Bengali communities in Tower Hamlets?

Does what you do with your children's health affect their future health?

How to encourage working class (those who pay for dental health) and minoritised communities to have good oral health and hygiene.

They should research how often residents in Tower Hamlets brush their teeth daily alongside how long they do it for and most importantly how vital oral health is for them.

How to create an environment where people do get to realise why oral hygiene is important and offer free education.



Everyone in the community love to feed their children chocolates and crisps and all the bad sugar because they think it's okay to feed them that. But they need to also be taught that there are alternatives that are just as good with low sugar and better for their health.

Mouth cancer. Tower Hamlets has a lot of smokers and people chewing paan. Alternatives that are just as good with low sugar and better for their health.

Also address the importance of oral health and what could happen if not taken care. Send out reminders and encourage residents to regularly get seen and talk about any issue they have or need help in getting better at maintaining good oral health.

I have done so many patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) activities before but hardly get to know anything about dental related research.



Understanding culture, communities, and environments

Our Big Mouth participants felt that researchers and dental students need to recognise and understand the cultural diversity and needs of people in Tower Hamlets and reflect this in our research and teaching. Some participants shared their negative and unpleasant experiences of dental care, which caused fear, anxiety, and shame. Participants felt that our dental students should be taught how to recognise and understand patient anxieties and broader social and health issues that could influence their experiences of dental care. They advocated for trauma-informed, patient-centred, and empathetic approaches that avoid patronising messages and address language barriers.



I personally believe they (dental students) should have a basic understanding of the different cultures in Tower Hamlets. This is because many residents here do not have share the conventional method of brushing teeth. Individuals I personally know use the Miswak alongside different powders for the teeth. These things should be considered as using conventional standards may not apply to many residents

Treat everyone as an adult i.e. don't be preachy about tooth hygiene and considered that mental health issues may be at play, don't think you always know better and do not insult people's intelligence with your actions

They are a medical professional, so the same principles need to be emphasised and properly trained for the importance of continuity of care, of active listening, of approaching patients with empathy and understanding (in contexts of trauma, language barriers, etc.), explain clearly what you are going to do before doing it, make sure they understand, etc.

Some people are conscious of going to the dentist because of fear or judgement.

I think it's a very diverse community, people look at health differently. Often people associate health issues only when they have long-term health issues, gum disease or decay do not worry people until they get old. Young people think they can get away of whitening teeth but not strengthen the roots."



Dental students should know that some people may have a fear so maybe address that to make people more comfortable when visiting their dentists and give them options.

I work with the Swadhinata Trust and we have investigated how public health messages are communicated... We found that community mediators were very important. What community mediators are used for your research?

Engaging communities to promote oral health

I think the dental students should be aware not everyone has been educated on the subject of oral health and that people's knowledge may vary depending on the person's education and upbringing.



Get to know the cultural differences and why people may not take good dental or oral care, therefore provide personalised care.

Next steps

The Big Mouth Tower Hamlets project surfaced four interconnected themes that will shape next steps and form a foundation for future community-partnered research, practice, and advocacy around oral health.

1 Integrating food, diet, sugar, and oral health within broader health agendas. Participants clearly linked oral health to broader issues of food access, sugar consumption, and overall well-being. Future work will explore interdisciplinary collaborations across public health, nutrition, and community food initiatives to examine how dietary practices influence oral health outcomes, particularly in underserved communities. We will aim to co-design interventions that promote healthier eating habits through culturally relevant education, dental training, and structural support.

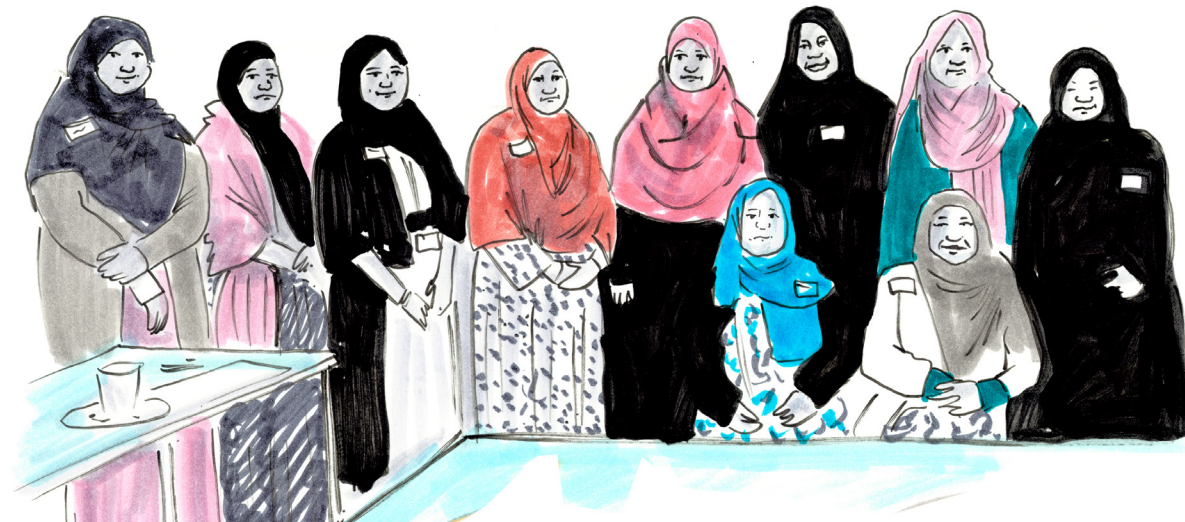
2 Addressing access barriers to NHS dental services. Residents consistently voiced concerns about navigating NHS dental care, including difficulties in registering with a dentist, long waiting times, and unclear eligibility criteria. These insights point to the urgent need for participatory research into structural access barriers, supported by local health commissioners. We will work with service users, NHS England, and local Integrated Care Boards to co-produce solutions and influence service design.

3 Raising awareness and preventive knowledge in communities. Many participants emphasised a lack of awareness around prevention and a need for clear, accessible information. Building on this, we plan to develop community-led oral health education programmes, co-created with local organisations and peer educators. These will be shaped by the voices of those with lived experience and integrated into everyday spaces, such as schools, community hubs, and faith-based settings.

4 Understanding cultural and environmental influences. Oral health is deeply shaped by cultural beliefs, household practices, language, and the local environment. Future research will investigate these factors using methods such as body mapping and photovoice to ensure culturally grounded insights. We will also explore further collaborations between dentists, social scientists and artists to understand how oral health is situated within broader lived realities.

Collectively, these next steps represent a commitment to sustaining the relationships, trust, and insights generated by Big Mouth Tower Hamlets. Our long-term vision is to establish a local research and engagement partnership that supports community members not only as participants but also as co-researchers, advocates, and changemakers in shaping the future of oral health in Tower Hamlets and beyond.

If you are interested in continuing to shape the future of oral health research and helping to advance the Big Mouth Tower Hamlets project, please contact the research team at bigmouth-thyes@qmul.ac.uk.





Thank you to all the contributors, supporters, and partners of **Big Mouth Tower Hamlets.**

