



No address, no problem: Registering at the GP with no fixed abode

A mystery shopping project

May 2018



What was the project about?

We wanted to find out how easy it is for people who don't have an address to register with a GP in Buckinghamshire.

Why did we do the project?

There is evidence from across the Local Healthwatch England network that homeless people are disadvantaged in their access to healthcare (<http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/raising-awareness-experiences-homeless-people/>).

We are committed to work on behalf underrepresented groups. Those with no fixed abode (NFA) are less likely to have the opportunity to give feedback to us.

Standards for registering people with proof of address

NHS Choices says that:

“You should not be refused registration or appointments because you don't have a proof of address or personal identification at hand. It is not considered a reasonable ground to refuse registration. This also applies if you are an asylum seeker, refugee, a homeless patient or an overseas visitor, whether lawfully in the UK or not.”

<https://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHServices/doctors/Pages/NHSGPs.aspx>

It also links to the NHS England's 'How to register with a GP' patient leaflet. The website also says that:

“If you are homeless, you are still entitled to register with a GP using a temporary address, which may be a friend's address or a day centre...”

<https://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHServices/doctors/Documents/how-to-register-with-a-gp-homeless.pdf>

The CQC website states that:

“CQC expects practices to register people who are homeless, people with no fixed abode, or those legitimately unable to provide documentation living within their catchment area who wish to register with them. Homeless patients are entitled to register with a GP using a temporary address which may be a friend's address or a day centre. The practice may also use the practice address to register them. Practices should try to ensure they have a way of contacting the patient if they need to (for example with test results). Some areas will have special services for homeless patients and practices may refer homeless patients into those services in line with local arrangements where it is in the best interests and with the agreement of the patient.”

<http://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/gps/nigels-surgery-29-looking-after-homeless-patients-general-practice>

What did we do?

We based our approach on a project by Healthwatch Stoke

(<http://www.healthwatchstokeontrent.co.uk/news/homeless-rejected-by-half-of-gps-in-stoke-on-trent/>).

From 22nd-24th January 2018 we looked at the available websites of all GP practices in Buckinghamshire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) area (one practice did not appear to have its own website at the time).

On 15th February 2018 a volunteer from Wycombe Homeless Connection (WyHC) rang 37 practices and two branch surgeries in the Buckinghamshire CCG area. We got responses from 35. We used the first call to a practice as a pilot and excluded this response from our analysis. As a result, the findings are based on 34 responses (33 telephone conversations and one recorded message).

The script we used is at Appendix 1. The person making the telephone call asked if it would be possible to register someone being supported by WyHC who was homeless. If further information was required they explained that the person was ‘sofa-surfing’ with a friend who lived near the practice. Sofa-surfing is an often-hidden form of homelessness where people find a temporary solution by staying with family or friends. Depending on the initial response we checked whether proof of address or identification would be required to register.

What did we discover?

We reviewed the results to see whether each GP practice’s response would be considered helpful or unhelpful to the caller. This was based on their approach rather than the actual details provided. Things we thought were helpful included:

- offering to find out from others in the practice if they didn’t know the answer
- signposting (for example explaining that all homeless people in Aylesbury register at one practice and the address of the ‘Hub’ is used to register patients)
- a ‘can do’ approach to making sure the person could get treatment
- a flexible approach to the information that would be required for registration

An unhelpful response would include:

- a recorded message giving information about how to register
- a definite 'no' to register without a fixed address or ID
- a suggestion to go to a minor injuries unit

On this basis:

- 28/34 practices gave a helpful response
- 6/34 practices gave an unhelpful response

Depending on the response to our first question we then asked some practices if either proof of address and /or identification was needed (as shown in the script). We received a variety of responses that are summarized below.

Would an address be needed?

About a third of practices said some form of address would be required. Of these:

- 4 practices said they'd be happy to accept the WyHC address as a "care of" address
- 3 said the address of the friend could be used (one said the address should be in the catchment area)
- 1 said that they could use the surgery address
- 1 mentioned the Hub in Aylesbury (an organisation similar to WyHC) could be used to register
- 4 practices said an address would be needed without any further details. One practice said they couldn't use WyHC as an address because it must be in their catchment area.

Would identification (ID) be needed?

13 practices said some form of identification would be needed but of these 10 were flexible about what it should be. Many said just to bring in whatever ID they had. Responses included:

- 1 said identification would be needed for permanent registration
- 1 said some form of photo identification would be needed
- 2 mentioned that details of a previous GP would be helpful or needed in order to register
- 1 said an NHS number would be helpful

Other points mentioned

In 10 cases the person we spoke to wanted to check with another member of the practice. Of these five asked us to call back. A further four promised to call us back and did so promptly.

During the conversations some of the other points made were:

- 4 suggested a solution would be to register as a temporary patient
- 2 suggested that the person should go to a minor injuries and illnesses unit for treatment

We know one practice planned to discuss this issue at a forthcoming practice meeting.

When we looked at the practice websites we noticed that two practice websites gave a link the NHS England 'How to register with a GP' leaflet. None of the practices we contacted mentioned the NHS leaflet during the phone call.

Our conclusions

Overall, over 80% of the practices contacted provided a helpful response. We do recognise that many GP practices (particularly those in rural areas) may not be asked about registering homeless people regularly but sofa-surfing is potentially relevant anywhere in the county. We also appreciate that certain information is helpful to practices (for example to match patient records and establish eligibility for NHS treatments). However, our findings show that there were a wide range of approaches taken by GP practices across the area. In some cases the practice policy (as portrayed by the response) does not seem to be aligned with the guidance in the NHS leaflet. However even when the response was helpful it was often not aligned with NHS guidance.

“NHS guidelines say that GP services cannot refuse to register someone because they are homeless, do not have proof of address or identification, or because of their immigration status. GP surgeries can only refuse to register someone if they are already full or if the person is living outside the practice area - and they must explain this in writing.”

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/improving-access-gp-services-people-who-are-homeless>

There were also a smaller number of practices who were not helpful. All this means that the process of registering as a person with no fixed abode is not as straightforward as it should be. This is particularly important as this is a vulnerable group, some of whom may easily be deterred by barriers to registration. This could result in a direct impact on their health and wellbeing.

Our recommendations

We recommend that:

- the CCG and GP Federations use their communications routes to raise awareness of this issue and help to ensure a consistent approach
- practice websites include a link to the NHS Choices webpage that gives information about how to register for a homeless patient (as well as other groups such as asylum seekers, refugees and for the gypsy, traveller and Roma communities)
- practices ensure staff are familiar with this guidance

What are we doing to ensure these are delivered?

- We have shared this report with the Buckinghamshire CCG and the Bucks GP federations: Fed Bucks and Medicas
- We will also publicise the findings so that each Practice's Patient Participation Group can consider how they can help
- All our reports are shared with Healthwatch England as the independent national champion for people who use health and social care services.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Wycombe Homeless Connection for their help with this project.

Appendix 1- Script used when making mystery shopper calls

Opening question	Hi, my name is []. I'm from Wycombe Homeless Connection. I am just ringing to see if it would be possible to register someone we're supporting who is homeless please?					
	Additional information provided during conversation was that the person is sofa-surfing with a friend near the practice.					
Response	↓					
	Yes, they can register	Yes, they can register but they will need ID	Yes, they can register but we need a 'care of' address/ proof of address	No, we can't register this patient	I'll need to check. Can I call you back?	Please go to our website for information
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Follow up question	Do they need to provide any information?	What if they don't have ID?	What if they don't have an address? Can WyHC be used as a c/o address?	Can you recommend anywhere please?	Provide contact number and record response provided	No follow up needed
	↓					
Response to follow up question						
Any other observations						

If you require this report in an alternative format, please contact us.

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