

Registering with a GP Practice

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Overview

Everyone living in the UK is entitled to free primary care.

In England, anyone can register with a GP surgery¹. Proof of address or immigration status, ID or an NHS number is not required^{2 3} and for good reason. To do so would make primary care much harder to access for groups already often at the sharp end of health inequality⁴.

Forecast data shows 24% of people in the UK (often the poorest and most marginalised) do not have access to identity documents like passports and driving license⁵. Data suggests⁶ whilst 76% of White people have a driving license, the percentage of Black people possessing a driving license is 54%. Other marginalised groups like migrants and asylum seekers, those who are homeless and people from Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) communities⁷ are also less likely to possess photo identity documents.

Primary care is usually the point of first contact with health services and facilitates entry to the rest of the health system. Improving access to health and care for all and reducing health inequity is a key aim of primary care⁸.

Both nationally⁹ and locally¹⁰, in contrast to policy guidelines, documentation is often a requirement of new patient registration at GP surgeries. Despite reports from Greenwich residents, we were surprised to find just how routinely documentation was asked for, and even when we challenged requests for documentation – how often we were still told we could not join a GP surgery as a new patient without it.

¹ <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/gp-practices/managing-your-practice-list/patient-registration>

² <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/gps/how-to-register-with-a-gp-surgery/>

³ However, GP practices can refuse to register new patients if:

- they are not taking any new patients
- patient lives outside their practice boundary
- patient has previously been removed from their register
- it's a long way from the practice to patient's home and they need extra care, for example home visits from the practice

⁴ Health inequalities can be defined as systematic and potentially remediable differences in one or more aspects of health across populations or population groups defined socially, economically, demographically or geographically.

⁵ https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Proof-of-identity-scheme-updated-March-2016.pdf

⁶ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/transport/driving-licences/latest#by-ethnicity-over-time>

⁷ Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) is a term used to describe people from a range of ethnicities who are believed to face similar challenges. These groups are distinct, but are often reported together.

⁸ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/inequalities-resource-sep-2018.pdf>

⁹ For example, one mystery shopping report found how people from GRT communities were refused registration since they did not have a fixed abode. (See <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-room-at-the-inn-findings-from-mystery-shopping-GP-practices.pdf>)

Another report that focused on the homeless found similar experience (See <https://www.healthylondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/More-than-a-statistic.pdf>)

This report highlights why migrants access to primary care services is important for the protection of their health but also of local communities (See <https://bjgp.org/content/bjgp/72/715/56.full.pdf>)

¹⁰ Feedback from our work with local communities in Greenwich.

Aims

To review:

- GP registration process for Greenwich residents
- Compliance with current regulations
- Support offered to patients with additional needs

Methodology

Our review was carried out in two parts – telephone mystery shopping and a website audit.

1. **Mystery Shopping:** Our mystery shoppers¹¹ called GP surgeries using two scenarios.
 - In the first scenario – our mystery shoppers said they were moving into the area and wanted to register at the practice.
 - In the second scenario – our mystery shoppers said an elderly family member, moving into the area from abroad to be closer to family, wanted to register at the practice.

In each round, we asked:

- a) How to register at the practice
- b) If patients can register without documentation
- c) What support is offered to patients needing help to register – such as patients with limited reading/writing skills or patients who are not fluent in English.

In addition, we noted how helpful the person answering our call was, i.e. if they were willing to listen to our questions, gave us clear information, and had a polite telephone manner.

¹¹ In mystery shopping callers contact service providers as customers and ask a set of specific questions. Service providers are not alerted that they may receive a call nor informed during the call that it is part of a mystery shopping exercise.

Calls were made on different times, on different days, during December 2021, and again in March 2022.

2. **Website audit:** We conducted an audit of GP practice websites see what information was available on registration, including:
 - a) How to register at the practice
 - b) If patients can register online at GP practice websites
 - c) If patients can register without documentation

Thank you to our volunteers

Volunteers play a vital role at Healthwatch Greenwich in helping people share their views and experiences and taking part in our research projects.

Thank you to all the Public Health students at the University of Greenwich who were responsible for supporting us with this mystery shopping report, in particular:

- Joke o Fakehinde
- Felix Ohenhen Isokpunwu
- Saroja Limbu
- Ugochi Ijoma
- Osebimu (Sebby) Amanerimi

Limitations

Assessing 'telephone manner' while important, is subjective and depends on our mystery shopper's perception of how they were treated on the call.

Our website audit is not exhaustive and only captures information that is easy to find (from a service user's perspective) on practice websites.

Findings – Telephone Mystery Shopping

How do I register as a new patient here?

In almost all cases, we were asked to go online to find information on how to register as a new patient. Not a single practice asked if we had the necessary digital skills/equipment/confidence to go online to find and interrogate the website.

No practice offered an alternative to 'going online' to find information until explicitly asked by our mystery shoppers. When directly asked for a paper form, instead of going online, most practices were able to provide one.

Most practices told us we needed documents to register as a new patient – usually one of each – photographic ID and a document confirming address – such as a bank statement. A few practices told us we could use either two types of ID (like a passport and a driving licence) or two proof of address documents (like a bank statement and a utility bill).

When our mystery shoppers challenged and said they didn't have documents, most practices responded by continuing to emphasise they could not register without documents.

One surgery said they could make an exception – but only if we were homeless¹². Another agreed to register us without documents but told us we would not be allowed access to online services until we could provide the required ID and proof of address documentation¹³.

- 4 in 5 GP surgeries in Greenwich told us we cannot register without proof of address.
- 3 in 5 GP surgeries in Greenwich told us we cannot register without proof of identity.
- Less than 1 in 5 GP surgeries in Greenwich told us we could register without any documents

¹² Manor brook PMS

¹³ Vanburgh Group Practice

How can I register as a patient with you?				
PCN	No of GP surgeries	Proof of address needed	Proof of identity needed	When challenged - register without documents
Blackheath and Charlton	4	3	1	2
Eltham	7	5	2	1
Greenwich West	6	5	4	1
Heritage	5	4	4	1
Riverview	9	9	7	1
Unity	6	5	5	1
TOTAL	37	31	23	7

Elderly relative

When we asked how to register an elderly relative coming to live in the UK to be closer to family, **more often than not – we were asked about their immigration status** – before we were given information on how to register them with the practice. A few practices said proof of immigration was a requirement of registration.

As before – most GP surgeries told us that **identity documentation and proof of address are a requirement for registration**. When we challenged by saying that our elderly relative would not have proof of address documents – as they were moving from abroad, a minority of GP surgeries said – **as special dispensation** – they could waive this requirement.

One surgery offered an alternative and told us proof of address would need to be **provided by a family member writing a letter to the practice** – vouching for the identity and address of their relative.

Another practice told us to **apply for a driving licence** in the elder relative's name or **transfer a utility bill** into their name. Given this would likely take some time – no suggestion was offered on **how services could be accessed by the elderly relative at the practice while waiting for this documentation to arrive**.

- **Two thirds of practices** told us our elderly relative **could not register without specific documentation**, usually address and identity. At some practices, immigration status was asked for too.

How can I register an elderly relative as a patient with you?				
PCN	No of GP surgeries	Proof of address needed	Proof of identity needed	When challenged - register without documents?
Blackheath and Charlton	4	2	2	2
Eltham	7	3	6	1
Greenwich West	6	5	5	1
Heritage	5	2	2	3
Riverview	9	5	5	4
Unity	6	6	6	0
TOTAL	37	23	26	11

Can you help me please?

As part of our mystery shopping call, when directed to a form (either on-line or paper copy), we said our written English was not so good and we'd need help to complete the form.

- While not always providing the information callers wanted to hear, our mystery shoppers found the **attitude of receptionists to be overwhelmingly pleasant and professional**.
- **Nearly 3 in 5** GP surgeries said they would be **willing to help us** complete the registration form either online or they would be willing to help us if we came in to complete a paper copy.
- **2 in 5** GP surgeries said they were already **too busy** and had **no time to answer clarifying questions or help us complete the form**.
- When we emphasised, we would not be able to complete the form without additional help – **we were not signposted to any organisations** (like Healthwatch Greenwich) **that can support in this way**. Most told us to get help from a family member or friend. **We were not asked if we had a family member or friend who could help in this way**.
- One surgery¹⁴ said they have a **dedicated day each week** when they can offer this type of help.

¹⁴ Trinity Medical Centre

My English is not so good – can you help me with the forms?

PCN	No of GP surgeries	Help filling form	Pleasant and professional on the telephone
Blackheath and Charlton	4	2	4
Eltham	7	3	6
Greenwich West	6	5	6
Heritage	5	2	3
Riverview	9	6	9
Unity	6	3	5
TOTAL	37	21	33

Elderly relative

When we called on behalf of an elderly family member, not fluent in English, most surgeries told us to bring them in and **an interpreter could be arranged**.

Others told us to bring them in and that **we** (as their relative) **would be expected to interpret for them**. We were not asked if our elderly relative would be happy to proceed in this way.

- While not always providing the information callers wanted to hear, our mystery shoppers found **receptionists to be overwhelmingly positive and professional on the telephone**
- **3 in 5 GP surgeries would arrange an interpreter**
- **2 in 5 GP surgeries did not offer to arrange an interpreter and assumed/expected relatives to translate**

She does not speak English – can you help her with the forms?

PCN	No of GP surgeries	Access to interpreter	Pleasant and professional on the telephone
Blackheath and Charlton	4	4	4
Eltham	7	6	7

Greenwich West	6	4	5
Heritage	5	2	2
Riverview	9	5	7
Unity	6	2	6
TOTAL	37	23	31

Mystery Shopping Rating (3= best and 0 = poorest)		
PCN	GP surgery	Rating
BLACKHEATH AND CHARLTON	MANOR BROOK PMS	2
	BLACKHEATH STANDARD PMS	3
	VANBRUGH GROUP PRACTICE	2
	FAIRFIELD PMS	1
ELTHAM	COLDHARBOUR HILL	2
	Coldharbour Surgery	2
	ELTHAM PALACE PMS	2
	SHERARD ROAD MEDICAL CENTRE	1
	NEW ELTHAM MEDICAL	1
	PRIMECARE PMS (ELMSTEAD)	2
	ELTHAM MEDICAL PRACTICE	2
GREENWICH WEST	PRIMECARE PMS (SOUTH STREET)	3
	BURNEY STREET PMS	2
	PLUMBRIDGE MEDICAL CENTRE	2
	WOODLANDS SURGERY	2
	Charlton Road Surgery	2
	GREENWICH PENINSULA	2
HERITAGE	TRIVENI PMS	3
	ABBAY WOOD SURGERY	2
	BASILDON ROAD SURGERY	1
	WAVERLEY PMS	0
	BANNOCKBURN SURGERY	0
RIVERVIEW	THAMESMEAD MED ASSOCIATES (GALLIONS REACH)	1

	Herongate Medical Centre (TMA Branch)	1
	ROYAL ARSENAL MEDICAL CENTRE	1
	ST MARKS PMS	2
	CONWAY PMS	1
	THE TRINITY MEDICAL CENTRE	2
	AT MEDICS thamesmead	2
	Holbourne Road (Valentine HP Branch)	3
	VALENTINE HEALTH PARTNERSHIP (Ferryview)	3
UNITY	PLUMSTEAD HEALTH CENTRE PMS	3
	Garland Road Medical centre (Plumstead Branch)	1
	ALL SAINTS MEDICAL CENTRE PMS	1
	GLYNDON PMS	2
	MOSTAFA PMS	0
	CLOVER HEALTH CENTRE	2

Findings – Website Audit

Online registration

- Over half of GP surgeries offered online patient registration
- Of those with online registration, half made clear that documents are required to register.
- A much smaller proportion indicated that documents were not required to register
- We found examples of easy to find pages with clear information on the registration process, highlighting documents are not essential for registration. However, this was often confusing¹⁵ with both statement on documents not being required and a list of 'accepted documents' set out on the same page.
- Links to the registration page was not always accessible. We checked sites over several days – and the registration page at some GP surgeries was unavailable for an extended period of time¹⁶.
- A small number of websites require new patients to download and print registration forms which may be tricky for those without IT equipment or a printer.

Online registration			
PCN	No of GP surgeries	Online registration	Register without documents
Blackheath and Charlton	4	2	0
Eltham	7	6	0
Greenwich West	6	2	0
Heritage	5	3	1
Riverview	9	5	4
Unity	6	4	0

¹⁵ <https://www.stmarksmedicalcentre.co.uk/navigator/new-patient-registration/>

¹⁶ <https://clover-health-centre.co.uk/navigator/new-patient-registration/>

TOTAL	37	21	5
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Website audit (3 = best and 0 = poorest)		
PCN	GP surgery	Rating
BLACKHEATH AND CHARLTON	MANOR BROOK PMS	1
	BLACKHEATH STANDARD PMS	1
	VANBRUGH GROUP PRACTICE	1
	FAIRFIELD PMS	0
ELTHAM	COLDHARBOUR HILL	1
	Coldharbour Surgery	1
	ELTHAM PALACE PMS	1
	SHERARD ROAD MEDICAL CENTRE	1
	NEW ELTHAM MEDICAL	0
	PRIMECARE PMS (ELMSTEAD)	1
	ELTHAM MEDICAL PRACTICE	1
GREENWICH WEST	PRIMECARE PMS (SOUTH STREET)	1
	BURNEY STREET PMS	2
	PLUMBRIDGE MEDICAL CENTRE	1
	WOODLANDS SURGERY	1
	GREENWICH PENINSULA	0
HERITAGE	TRIVENI PMS	1
	ABBEY WOOD SURGERY	2
	BASILDON ROAD SURGERY	2
	WAVERLEY PMS	2
	BANNOCKBURN SURGERY	0
RIVERVIEW	THAMESMEAD MED ASSOCIATES	3
	Herongate Medical Centre (TMA Branch)	0
	ROYAL ARSENAL MEDICAL CENTRE	1
	ST MARKS PMS	2
	CONWAY PMS	1
	AT MEDICS thamesmead	1
	Holbourne Road (Valentine HP Branch)	3
	VALENTINE HEALTH PARTNERSHIP	3

UNITY	PLUMSTEAD HEALTH CENTRE PMS	1
	Garland Road Medical centre (Plumstead Branch)	1
	ALL SAINTS MEDICAL CENTRE PMS	1
	GLYNDON PMS	0
	MOSTAFA PMS	1
	CLOVER HEALTH CENTRE	1

Recommendations

1. SEL CCG (Greenwich) to remind all practices of the **NHS guidelines on registration**; patients are **not** required to provide proof of ID or address or immigration status to register as a new patient.
2. SEL CCG (Greenwich) to encourage practices to use a **standardised online and paper registration form** that makes clear that documentation is not required.
3. GP websites to use a **standardised, best practice, form of wording** regarding patient registration e.g., no proof of ID, address, or immigration status is required.
4. Call handling staff to be reminded that **proof of address and identity are not required** for patient registration.
5. Call handling staff to be reminded that not everyone can access websites and **paper forms as alternatives should be actively offered**.
6. Call handling staff to be reminded that **support to complete registration forms should be offered** or **patients signposted to organisations** (such as Healthwatch Greenwich) **that can help in this way**.
7. Call handling staff to be reminded to **offer access to interpreting services**, and not to assume that family/friends can be called upon, or that it is always appropriate for family or friends to interpret.
8. SEL CCG to request NHS Digital does **not penalise GP practices** who follow NHS guidelines, do not request documentation, and are then unable to easily verify registrations.



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