

Access to GP Practices in Southampton

Background

In 2016, Healthwatch Southampton published a report regarding the barriers to registering with a GP, particularly for those individuals who may not have a form of required ID, such as homeless individuals, young people, and refugees/ asylum seekers. Despite undergoing extensive research into problem, which led to an agreement with local GP surgeries to not turn those without ID away, it has been brought to our attention that this has recently become a problem for some.

Therefore, at the end of 2022, Healthwatch Southampton contacted Southampton GP surgeries to learn more about the process of becoming a new patient. We wanted to know whether they are currently taking new patients, the process (online or paper form), and whether ID and proof of address is required. This was important due to receiving reports of individuals (sometimes vulnerable) being rejected as a new patient due to lack of ID and/or address.

According to NHS advice and guidance

“Anyone in England can register with a GP surgery. Its free to register.

You do not need proof of address or immigration status, ID or an NHS number.¹

The NHS also provides guidance to those that are homeless, stating that a temporary address can be given. It is particularly important that homeless individuals have access to primary care as data suggests poor physical health is more prevalent in this population group². People can also contact

¹ [How to register with a GP surgery - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)

² [Health matters: rough sleeping - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

any GP for treatment if they are away from home, not registered with a GP, or if it's a medical emergency. Individuals can sign up to be a temporary patient for up to 3 months¹.

According to the NHS find a GP website, there are 37 GPs that serve Southampton (SO14-SO19). In total we managed to contact 20 practices to find out the above information. It is important that everyone has access to a GP to help with health concerns, administer prescriptions, treat conditions, and provide referrals to important services. We were unable to reach some practices due to telephone waiting times and/or no response to emails. However, we understand that GP surgeries are currently very busy and under pressure. Please note that there may be differences in our findings since conducting this research in November/ December 2022.

Findings

From the 20 practices we got responses from, 4 currently have closed waiting lists for time periods varying from 3 to 9 months. (A closed list requires a formal application process requiring approval to allow GP practices to do this.)

2 practices are open for patients but only for those not already registered locally, rather than those who are looking to change their local GP. We suspect that this is to manage the demands on the practices whilst ensuring the local population have access to primary healthcare.

In terms of the registration process, you can register online at 75% of the 20 practices; with 5 stating they are currently waiting for an online registration form. Online access is important to create a registration process that is convenient, however, those without internet/digital access must have

alternative options. These problems were found from research conducted by the NHS which identified language barriers, lack of access to devices and the internet, and lack of digital skills as possible practical challenges to online registration³. Around half of the practices have the option of both online and in-person registration processes.


Three practices stated that ID is necessary, this is not following the current NHS guidance that states that no ID is required. The other practices stated it is not compulsory, but patients may have to speak to the practice manager to overcome this. Overall, this is positive, however speaking to the manager may create an additional barrier for those seeking care. This could be a problem when individuals are unwell or have other accessibility issues, and do not have the time or ability to arrange this conversation with the practice manager. This may be especially difficult for marginalised groups such as refugees and non-English speakers. Furthermore, it is unclear how long this process takes, considering the pressures on GP practice staff. A catchment area is in place for all but six of the practices. These are in place to manage patient lists, and it is also important that patients can easily travel to their GP.

Summary

Overall, our findings were relatively positive, but it is important to ensure that the process of registering with a GP practice is as straightforward as possible. Healthwatch Southampton will continue to monitor feedback regarding registering with a GP to make sure that people are getting access to the care they need. For the practices that claimed ID was an

³ [Overcoming barriers to GP registration - NHS Digital](#)

essential part of the registration process, we will communicate to them the latest guidance given by NHS England.



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