

Mystery Shopper: Registering with a GP without a Permanent Address in Barnet

Healthwatch Barnet was alerted to difficulties in accessing/registering with GP services in Barnet, especially for people without a permanent address. We decided to research the registration process in Barnet by contacting the 57 registered GPs in the borough, through a mystery shopper exercise.

The NHS Primary Medical Care Policy and Guidance Manual¹ states that people do not need a fixed address or identification to register at a GP practice in England. Healthwatch England have been working with the **Healthy London Partnership**² to highlight this. They have developed a resource pack to support practice staff to deal with enquiries from people without a permanent address. This includes 'my right to healthcare' cards, created in collaboration with **Groundswell**³ (pictured on this page). These can be used by people without an address, to show practices that they should be able to register regardless.



Barnet CCG recognition of the issue and response:

“ All Barnet CCG GP practices are operating an open list, which means they are contractually obligated to register patients who request to do so and whom reside in their catchment area. If a patient is homeless or of no fixed address, there is provision for practices to register them. Patients are not required to provide proof of identity/address if they don't have it. Further information on this can be found on NHS choices⁴. If a patient is residing in the area on a short-term basis, they are able to register with a GP as a temporary patient (as long as the temporary address is within that practice's catchment area).

As a CCG, we are committed to ensuring that every patient is able to access primary care services. We will reinforce that message by reminding all of our practices of their obligations with regard to registering patients, regardless of whether they have a permanent home address. We will do this by sending an update in our practice bulletin. If patients are experiencing difficulty registering with a GP practice, we would encourage them to contact the CCG via BARCCG.Quality@nhs.net and we will be happy to help. Our website has a contacts page for the public, which can be found on our website⁵.

Practices have already been written to about registering.



What we did:

¹ NHS England, Primary Medical Care Policy and Guidance Manual, 2017, Available online: www.england.nhs.uk/publication/primary-medical-care-policy-and-guidance-manual-pgm [Accessed March 2018]

² <https://www.healthylondon.org> [accessed May 2018]

³ <http://groundswell.org.uk> [Accessed May 2018]

⁴ <https://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/doctors/Pages/NHSGPs.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.barnetccg.nhs.uk/contact-us.htm>

The research was carried out over the course of four days, in February 2018. Calls were made to 54 GP surgeries (as three of the listed practices came under one contact information and we were unable to get through to one of the surgeries despite numerous attempts).

The staff member called the GP surgeries enquiring about registering as a patient and presented as someone who was between addresses, without the possibility of having a permanent address in the near future.

What we found:

Are you registering new patients?

Of the 54 GP surgeries we spoke to, 51 (94%) were registering new patients. Those that were not, said their list was currently closed but gave no further explanation. One surgery said to call again in April, as they had recently merged with another surgery.

Do I need to bring anything with me to register?

When asked about documents required for registration, *all* of the 51 GP surgeries (that were registering new patients,) asked for proof of address. This was mainly requested to prove that the patient lived in the practice's catchment area. In addition to proof of address, 43 practices (84%) requested proof of ID. When the caller said that they were staying with friends, the surgery wanted to know the friend's postcode.

A small number of surgeries asked that the patient bring other documentation and information to register. Four of the surgeries (8%) asked for the patient NHS number or card. Two surgeries (4%) asked for the contact information of the patient's previous GP. On a few occasions when the caller said they had no fixed postcode, they were asked some personal residency information such as their legal status in the country.

Is it possible to register without ID/proof of address?

GPs were asked if it was possible to register without the requested documentation. 51 (94%) of the surgeries said the caller must have the correct documents. The majority of GPs (40, 74%) did not offer a solution to the caller when they said they did not have an address. However, 14 (26%) offered some form of advice to the caller. This included four (7%) that gave information on access to urgent care and walk-in centres and three (5%), made suggestions to the caller, to assist them with registration, such as temporarily registering or speaking with the practice manager:

"We can try to register you temporarily"

"Maybe if you come in and explain your circumstances the manager will consider registering you"

"You can get a letter and explain you are living with someone then the manager might consider it."

Conclusions:

NHS England operating procedures state that everyone should be able to register with a GP practice. This research shows this may be challenging for people without a permanent address, or access to ID, trying to register with a GP in Barnet. Often proof of address was required to prove that the patient lived within the practice catchment area.

Healthwatch Barnet was pleased to receive Barnet CCG's rapid response and recognition of the issue, following these findings. It was encouraging to see that they have already contacted Barnet GPs to remind them of their obligation to register patients who request to, whether they have proof of address or not. This is particularly important for vulnerable groups, including those who are homeless.



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