

Access to GP services in Tower Hamlets

A Mystery shopper study for NHS Safe Surgeries

Co-produced with Healthwatch Tower Hamlets volunteers



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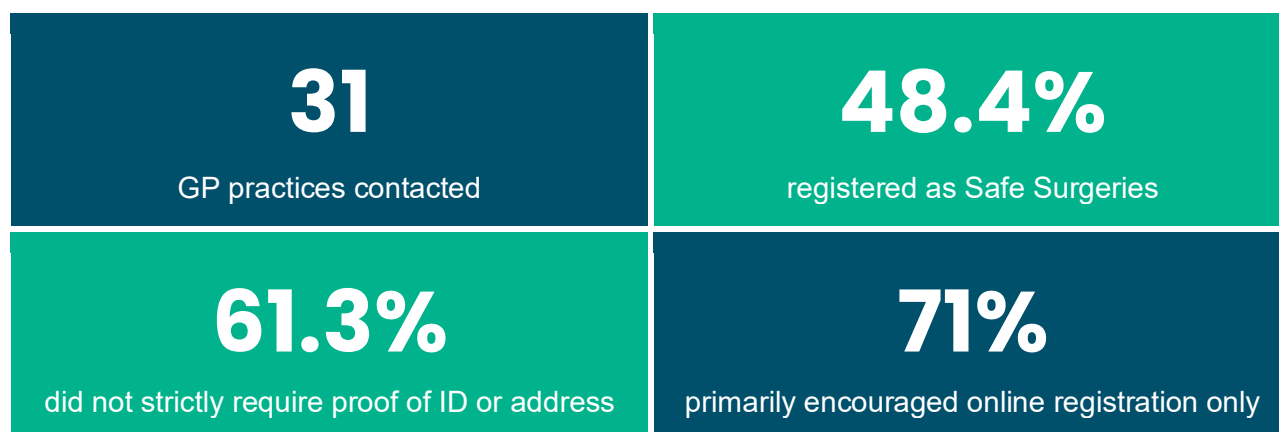
Executive Summary

This report explores access to GP registration in Tower Hamlets and assesses whether GP practices follow inclusive registration policies guided by the NHS and the Safe Surgeries initiative.

The Challenge Migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and people without a fixed address may face barriers when attempting to register with GP practices, particularly if they are unable to provide proof of address or identification.

To better understand these challenges, a mystery shopper exercise was conducted from December 2025 to February 2026. Healthwatch Tower Hamlets was not commissioned to take up this research, however it was viewed as an important piece of work for our local community.

Our Approach A total of 31 GP practices across Primary Care Networks in Tower Hamlets were contacted anonymously by telephone to enquire about the GP registration process.



Key Findings The findings showed that only 29% of practices we spoke to offered both online and in-person registration, while 71% primarily encouraged online registration. Although 61.3% of practices reported that proof of address or photo identification was not strictly required, some practices still required patients to live within their catchment area or provided unclear guidance regarding registration requirements. In a small number of cases, temporary registration options were available for individuals without a permanent address.

Conclusion The findings indicate that while many GP practices demonstrate flexibility in their registration processes, there are inconsistencies in how registration policies are communicated and implemented. Improving staff awareness of Safe Surgeries guidance and ensuring consistent communication of registration policies may help reduce barriers to accessing GP services in Tower Hamlets.

Introduction

Access to primary healthcare services is a fundamental component of an equitable healthcare system. In the United Kingdom, individuals have the right to register with a General Practitioner (GP) regardless of immigration status, housing circumstances, or the ability to provide identification documents (NHS England, 2024).



The Challenge

However, in practice, certain groups including **migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and individuals experiencing homelessness** may face challenges when attempting to register with GP practices (Doctors of the World UK, 2022).



Causes & Impact

These barriers may arise due to requests for **proof of address, photo identification, or uncertainty among practice staff regarding registration eligibility**. Such barriers can discourage individuals from seeking care and may contribute to health inequalities within vulnerable populations.

About Safe Surgeries

To address these challenges, the **NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB)** works in collaboration with **Doctors of the World UK** to promote engagement with **Safe Surgeries** across Northeast London (NEL). The initiative aims to make GP services more accessible for people who may face barriers when trying to register, particularly migrants and other vulnerable groups.

Practices that join the Safe Surgeries network commit to making their registration processes more inclusive. This includes ensuring that patients are not refused registration because they do not have proof of address, identification documents, or due to their immigration status. Practices are supported and have access to guidance, training, and practical resources such as translated patient information materials and staff guidance on inclusive registration procedures.

About Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is a diverse borough with a significant migrant population and varying levels of socioeconomic deprivation. Ensuring equitable access to GP services is therefore particularly important in this area. Understanding how GP practices implement registration policies and communicate registration requirements can help identify potential barriers faced by residents attempting to access healthcare.

Our Aims

This project aimed to explore how GP practices in Tower Hamlets respond to enquiries about GP registration, particularly when individuals may lack standard documentation such as proof of address or photo identification. The study also aimed to identify variations in registration practices across Primary Care Networks and highlight areas where improvements could support better access to primary healthcare services.

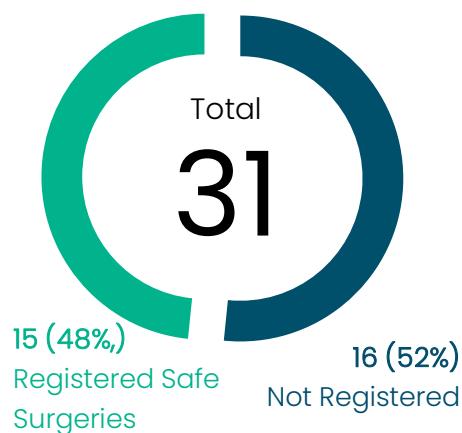


Methodology

Research Scope

A total of **31 GP practices** were contacted during the study period. Of these, 15 practices (48.4%) were registered as NHS Safe Surgeries, while 16 practices (51.6%) were not formally signed up to the initiative.

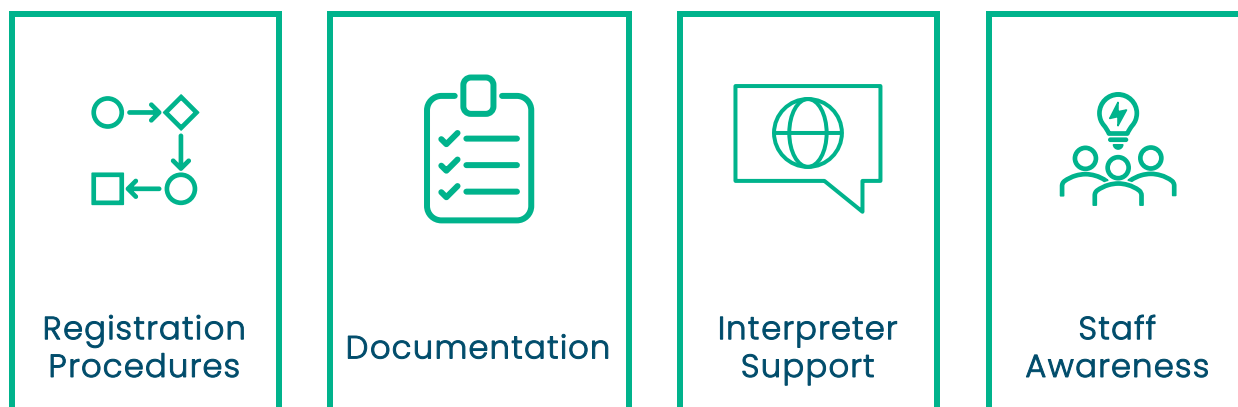
Practices were grouped according to their **Primary Care Network (PCN)** areas (Networks 1–8).



Mystery Shopping Calls

Primary data collection involved anonymously contacting GP practices across Tower Hamlets by telephone and posing as prospective patients seeking registration.

The calls aimed to **evaluate registration procedures, documentation requirements, availability of interpreter support, and awareness of the NHS Safe Surgeries initiative** among practice staff.



What We Asked

- Whether patient registration is conducted online, in person, or through both methods
- Requirements for proof of address, photo identification, or alternative documentation
- Flexibility when patients are unable to provide documentation

- Whether absence of documentation affects registration processing time or access to services
- Whether interpreter support was available
- Awareness of practice staff regarding the NHS Safe Surgeries initiative

How We Made the Calls

- Calls were generally conducted **after 10:30–11:00 am** to avoid peak morning hours. However, this timing may have contributed to the relatively short waiting times reported in the findings.
- Where calls were not answered, **up to three attempts** were made to reach the practice.
- Waiting times and the clarity of information provided by staff were also noted during the calls.
- The information collected was recorded and analysed to identify potential trends in registration practices and potential barriers across the different Primary Care Networks.



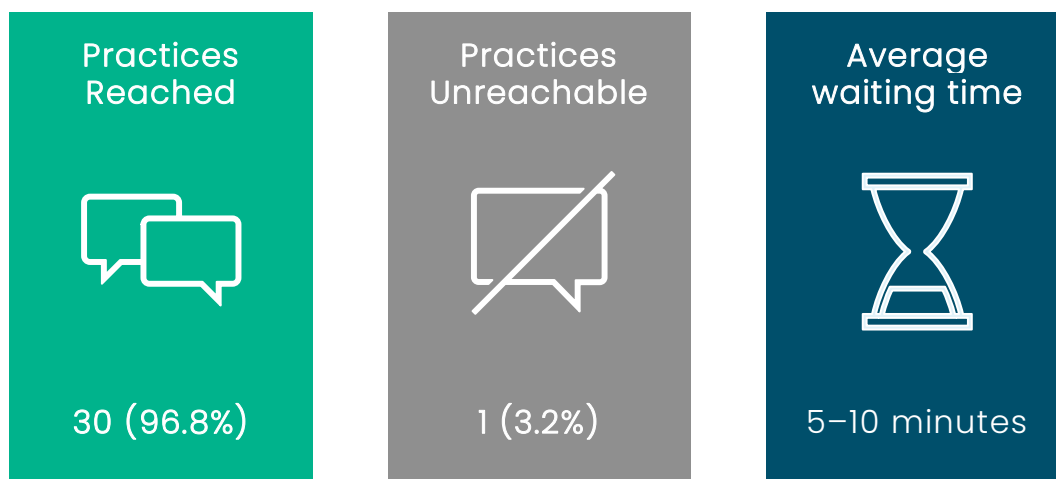
This mystery shopping exercise was co-produced with Healthwatch Tower Hamlets volunteers, who conducted the calls and helped shape the findings. Their involvement strengthened the authenticity and quality of this research.



Key Findings

The mystery shopper exercise identified several variations in GP registration procedures across Tower Hamlets. Key findings are highlighted below.

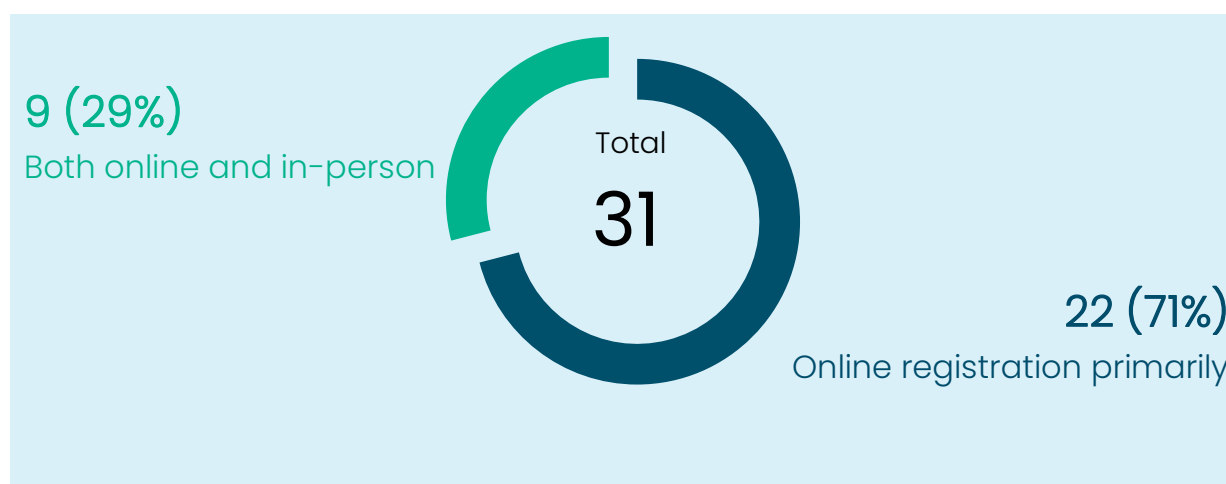
Telephone Call Experience



Registration Methods

Only 29% of GP practices (9 out of 31) proactively offered both online and in-person registration options.

71% of GP practices (22 out of 31) primarily encouraged online registration, providing paper registration forms only upon request.



Documentation Requirements

61.3% of GP practices (19 out of 31) reported that proof of address or photo identification were not strictly required for patient registration. However, 11 practices required patients to provide a postcode within the practice catchment area.

- **2 GP practices (6.5%)**, both located in Primary Care Network 8, stated that documentation were not required during registration but requested photo identification during the patient's first in-person appointment.
- **2 GP practices (6.5%)**, located in PCN 1 and PCN 6, required proof of address and accepted registration only for individuals with a permanent address.
- **2 GP practices (6.5%)**, located in Tower Network PCN and PCN 6, did not provide clear information during the call and directed the caller to consult their website for documentation requirements.

Requirement	Number of Practices	% of Total
No proof of address or photo ID required	19	61.3%
Catchment postcode required	11	35.5%
Proof of address required	2	6.5%
Photo ID required during first visit	2	6.5%
(Practices Unreachable)	1	3.2%
Total	31	100%

Vulnerable and Special Situations

- **1 GP practice (3.2%)** within PCN 1 reported allowing registration using a temporary address.
- **2 GP practices (6.5%)** within PCN 7 and PCN 8 offered temporary registration for individuals who **were newly moved or without a fixed address**.
- **1 GP practice (3.2%)** within PCN 2 reported allowing registration for **homeless individuals**, but only after completion of a detailed eligibility questionnaire.

Situation	Number of Practices	PCN Location
Temporary address accepted	1	PCN 1
Temporary registration allowed	2	PCN 2 & 7
Homeless registration (with eligibility questionnaire)	1	PCN 2

Safe Surgeries Awareness

Although **48.4%** of GP practices contacted are registered as Safe Surgeries, awareness of the initiative among reception staff varied. Some staff were able to confirm their familiarity with inclusive registration policies, while others were unfamiliar with the initiative.

No GP practice asked about the caller's date of entry into the UK during the registration enquiry, indicating that immigration-related questions were not raised during initial registration discussions.

One practice within PCN 6 could not be reached after three call attempts, with waiting times exceeding 30 minutes. For all other practices, the average waiting time ranged from 5 to 10 minutes.

15

Practices registered as Safe Surgeries (48.4%)

16

Practices not registered as Safe Surgeries (51.6%)

Overall, while most practices demonstrated flexibility in registration policies, the findings suggest inconsistencies in documentation requirements, communication clarity, and awareness of Safe Surgeries principles across networks.

Conclusion

This mystery shopper study explored how GP practices in Tower Hamlets respond to enquiries about patient registration, particularly when individuals may not have proof of address or photo identification. The findings indicate that while most GP practices demonstrate flexibility in their registration procedures, there are still inconsistencies in how registration policies are communicated and implemented across different Primary Care Networks.

Although many practices reported that documentation was not strictly required, some practices continued to apply restrictions or requests related to catchment areas, proof of address, or other documentation requirements. Additionally, 6.5% of practices (2 out of 31) did not provide clear information over the phone and directed callers to their websites rather than explaining the registration process, which may create additional barriers for individuals with limited digital access or language barriers. These inconsistencies may create confusion or discourage individuals particularly vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees, or people without a fixed address from attempting to register with a GP.

Strengthening awareness of the NHS Safe Surgeries guidance and ensuring consistent communication of the registration procedures may help improve equitable access to GP services across Tower Hamlets.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this mystery shopper study, several improvements could strengthen equitable access to GP registration across Tower Hamlets.

1

Improve awareness of Safe Surgeries guidance among GP practice staff

Although national guidance states that patients should not be refused GP registration due to lack of identification or proof of address, the findings suggest that awareness of this varies across practices. Some practices required a permanent address or provided unclear information about registration requirements.

Increasing staff awareness of the Safe Surgeries initiative could help ensure that registration policies are applied consistently and that patients without documentation were not discouraged from registering. Primary Care Networks and local healthcare partners should provide regular guidance or training for reception and administrative staff to reinforce the principles of an inclusive GP registration process.

2

Ensure clear and consistent communication of registration requirements

The mystery shopper exercise found that many GP practices did not provide clear information about registration requirements over the phone and instead directed callers to check their websites. For individuals who may face language barriers or have limited or no digital access, this may create additional barriers to registering with a GP. Practices should ensure that clear information about GP registration policies is available both online and through staff communication, and that reception staff are able to confidently explain registration procedures to prospective patients.

3

Improve accessibility of registration for vulnerable groups

While several GP practices demonstrated flexibility in registering individuals without proof of address, others required a permanent address or applied stricter criteria. This variation may create barriers for individuals experiencing homelessness or those who have recently moved to the area. GP practices are encouraged to follow national guidance that allows registration without proof of address, and where appropriate offer temporary registration options so that individuals can access healthcare services when needed.

4

Encourage wider adoption of the Safe Surgeries initiative

At the time of the study, only 48.4% of GP practices contacted were registered as Safe Surgeries within Tower Hamlets. Increasing participation in the initiative could help promote inclusive registration practices across the borough and reduce barriers to accessing primary healthcare. Local organisations could work with GP practices to raise awareness of the benefits of the Safe Surgeries initiative and encourage more practices to sign up.

References

NHS England, 2024. *Primary Medical Care Policy and Guidance Manual*. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/primary-medical-services-policy-and-guidance-manual-pgm-2/> [Accessed 10 March 2026].

Doctors of the World UK, 2023. *Access to Primary Care*. Available at: <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/what-we-stand-for/advocacy/access-to-primary-care/> [Accessed 10 March 2026].

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