Safe surgeries
GP registration for vulnerable groups

healthwatch
Waltham Forest

Introduction

In 2024, Healthwatch Waltham Forest undertook a survey to evaluate how accessible GP surgeries are for vulnerable groups, such as migrants and those without regular identification or proof of address.

The report replicates a similar report conducted by Waltham Forest Save Our NHS in May 2023.

This report also presents the findings from a website review of GP practices in the Waltham Forest area. The goal is to identify barriers and recommend improvements to ensure all residents can access primary healthcare services.

Safe surgeries

Introduction:

The Safe Surgeries Initiative, led by Doctors of the World, aims to reduce barriers to healthcare for vulnerable populations like migrants and refugees. Under NHS guidelines, patients do not have to provide ID, proof of address, or immigration status to register with a GP, yet many practices still ask for these documents, creating unnecessary obstacles.

Safe Surgeries work to eliminate these barriers by ensuring that GP practices adopt inclusive registration policies, train staff, and communicate clearly with patients. The initiative emphasises that practices must be welcoming to all, regardless of documentation or language ability.

Why it matters:

For vulnerable individuals, fear of being turned away or concerns about their immigration status often prevent them from accessing healthcare. This can lead to delayed treatment and unnecessary trips to overcrowded A&E departments. The Safe Surgeries Initiative ensures that everyone, regardless of background, can access primary care without fear or bureaucratic hurdles, improving both individual health outcomes and overall community well-being.

In a diverse borough like Waltham Forest, adopting Safe Surgeries is crucial to ensuring equitable healthcare access for all residents.

Methodology

Between August and September 2024, a series of phone calls were made to the 39 GP surgeries in Waltham Forest.

The phone surveyors posed as individuals inquiring on behalf of a friend who had recently moved to Waltham Forest and did not have proof of address or photo identification.

We also reviewed the surgeries' websites to check whether they followed the Safe Surgeries initiative and allowed and/or required online registration.

Findings:

1. **Phone response time:**

- The average time to answer a call ranged from 2 to 6 minutes.
- Some surgeries required 3 call attempts before connecting.

2. **Proof of address requirement:**

- 13% of surgeries did not require proof of address.
- 87% of surgeries asked for proof of address.

Proof of address required:

87% **73%**

September 2024   May 2023

Findings:

3. Photo ID requirement:

- **22%** of surgeries did not require photo ID for registration.
- **78%** required photo ID, with passports being the most commonly accepted form of identification followed by birth certificates.

	No ID required	ID required but can accommodate	No registration without ID
Percent of GP surgeries	22%	53%	25%
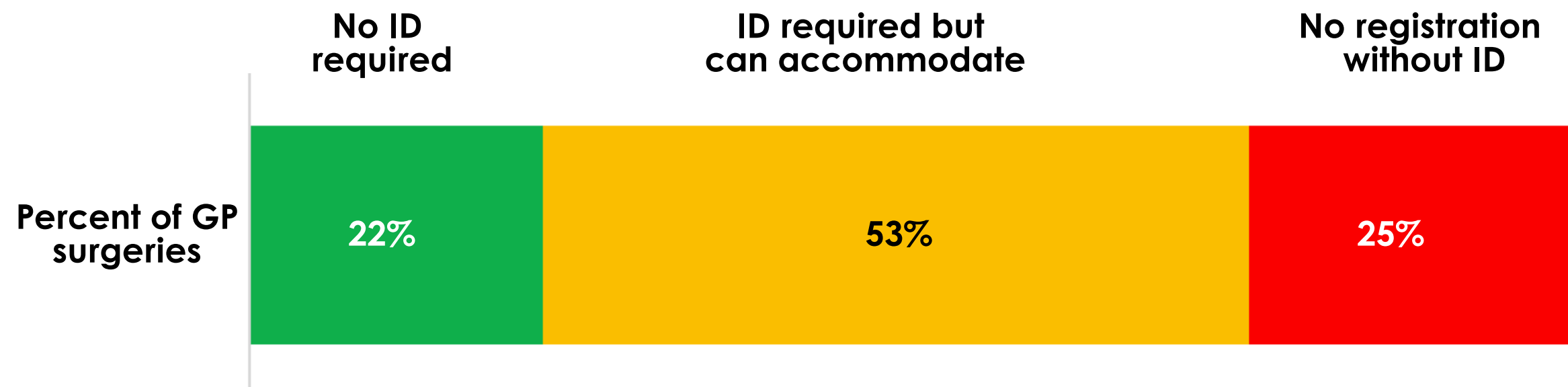
Findings:

3. Photo ID requirement:

- The survey found that 53% of GP surgeries reported requiring photo ID for registration, but that they were willing to make accommodations if they were pressed. This often involved being given the opportunity to come into the practice to discuss potential options. This suggests that, in practice, patients without photo ID could still be registered if they advocated for themselves or pressed the issue. However, this approach creates an indirect barrier, especially for vulnerable groups like refugees or undocumented migrants who may hesitate to "push" for fear of negative repercussions or drawing attention to their lack of documentation. This reluctance can prevent these individuals from accessing essential healthcare, or accessing care in the wrong places e.g. A&E, underscoring the need for clear, accessible policies that remove the expectation of photo ID altogether.
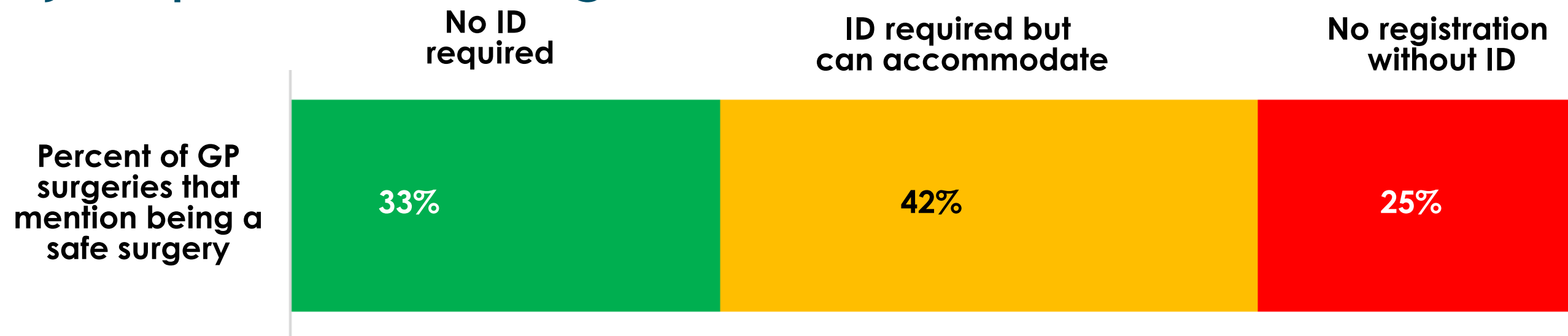
78%
September 2024

49%
May 2023

In May 2023, 49% of GP surgeries required photo ID, including those that could accommodate patients without it if necessary. However, our latest data shows that 78% of surgeries now require photo ID, representing a significant increase in this barrier to registration, even if some surgeries remain flexible in practice.

Findings:

4. Safe surgery status:

- **32%** of GP surgeries mentioned being Safe Surgeries on their websites.
- **53%** of surgeries, while requiring ID, were willing to work with patients lacking documentation based on the phone conversations.
- **25%** of GP surgeries that mention being safe surgeries, do in fact, say they require IDs for registration.

|	No ID required	ID required but can accommodate	No registration without ID
Percent of GP surgeries that mention being a safe surgery	33%	42%	25%

25% of GP surgeries that identify as Safe Surgeries still require IDs for registration, highlighting a gap between signing up for the initiative and fully implementing its principles. Only 33% of surgeries are truly adhering to the Safe Surgeries framework, demonstrating that simply committing to the initiative does not guarantee its practical application. This underscores the need for ongoing monitoring and support to ensure its effective implementation.

Findings:

5. Online registration:

- **100%** of surgeries offered online registration, which could help reduce the barriers posed by in-person documentation requirements.

- However, **47%** of surgeries provided online-only registration on their websites, which could create a significant barrier for those who are digitally excluded or lack access to the internet.

- Additionally, online registration forms may still require documentation, presenting another potential barrier that warrants further exploration.
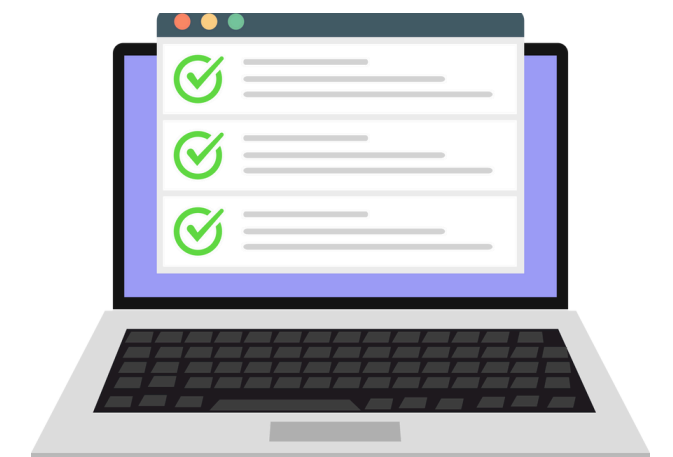
The good care framework
What does good care look like?

Everybody can THRIVE

Accessible

Competent

Person-centred

Trustworthy

The good care framework has been developed based directly on what local people have told us.

We asked local people open-ended questions about what good health and care means to them. At community events and in focus groups we helped local people to draw out what their own vision of good care would look like, using Liberating Structures and Participative Appraisal tools.

We took what they told us and and started to use qualitative data coding to identify themes, these themes eventually developed into the good care framework and our four pillars of good care, or four aspects of what makes the difference between good care and inadequate care. We also looked at the wider issues that impact good care at a society level.
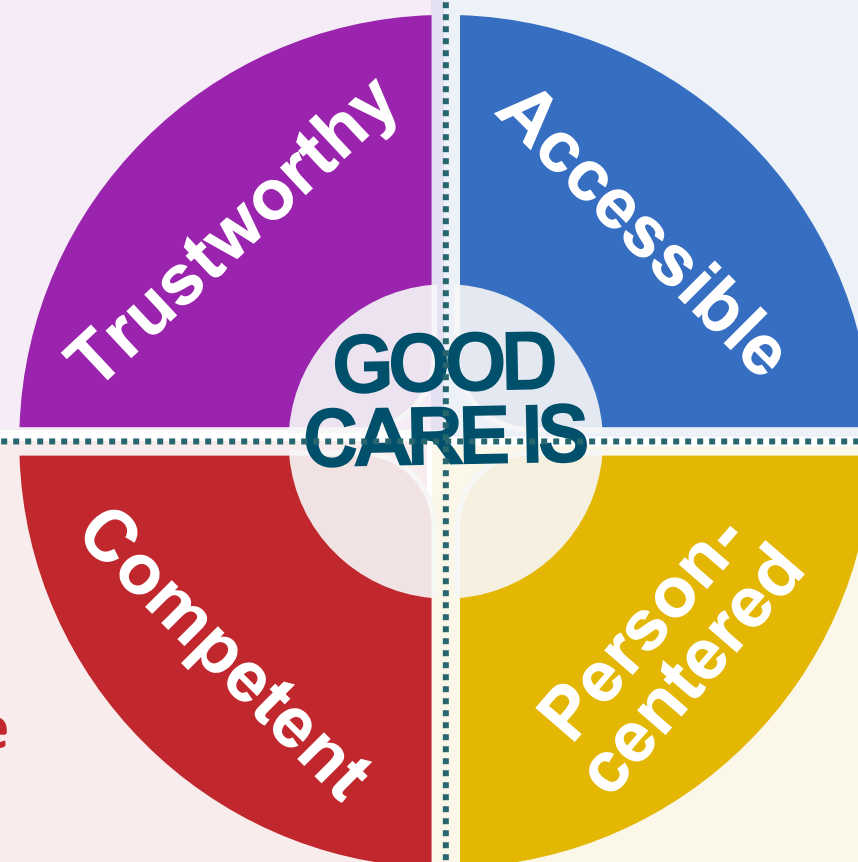
The resulting framework, informed by what local people said, can be used by stakeholders to develop their own success measures and evaluation tools. We have used it to examine in depth four priorities, chosen by local people in previous consultations.

Care is trustworthy when:

- Patients feel listened to and understood.
- Patients understand why a certain course of action is taken; communication is good; they don't feel fobbed off.
- Patients feel supported.
- Patients are treated with kindness, dignity and respect.
- Confidentiality and privacy are protected.
- Services are accountable to patients.

Care is accessible when:

- Patients can get the care they need when they need it; waiting lists and waiting times are reasonable.
- Obstacles to accessing care (such as those relating to language, disability, poverty, geography or bureaucracy) are understood and appropriately addressed.
- The process of accessing care is smooth and straightforward.

Trustworthy

Accessible

GOOD CARE IS

Competent

Person-centered

Care is competent when:

- Patients are diagnosed correctly and receive the best possible treatment for their condition; they are treated in accordance with NICE guidelines and scientific evidence.
- Medical professionals are knowledgeable of patients' conditions and circumstances, above and beyond the one they specialise in.
- Services are well-organised, well-run and free of admin errors.
- Services are adequately staffed and resourced in terms of equipment and environment.

Care is person-centred when:

- Patients feel involved in their care and can make decisions about it.
- Medical professionals treat the person, not the condition; care is personalised taking into account patient's circumstances, conditions, preferences and abilities.
- There is continuity of care and handover of information between professionals; patients don't need to repeat their story multiple times.
- Health services work well with each other and referrals run smoothly; they are also integrated with services outside of healthcare (social care, community, advice, leisure etc.)

Findings in relation to the good care framework:

- **Accessibility:** Our survey found that 78% of GP surgeries required photo ID and/or proof of address to register. This can serve as a barrier to vulnerable groups, thus failing to meet the Accessibility pillar of the Good Care Framework, which advocates for the removal of such obstacles.

- **Trustworthiness:** The inconsistency in registration policies (e.g., some practices requiring ID while others do not) may reduce trust in the system. This inconsistency can be particularly challenging for refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, who may have an inherent distrust of authority due to past experiences with government agencies. For these individuals, navigating unclear or overly strict requirements can amplify fears, reducing their willingness to seek essential care. Patients need to feel confident that they can access care without unnecessary barriers or bureaucratic hurdles.

- **Person-Centred Care:** The framework emphasises that patients should be treated with understanding of their specific circumstances and of the reasons why they cannot provide the same kinds of documentation as other practices. Practices that offer alternatives for those lacking documentation show a more person-centred approach, while those that turn away vulnerable patients fall short.

- **Competency:** Ensuring reception staff are trained to follow NHS guidelines and offer flexible solutions (e.g., allowing alternative documentation) aligns with the Competent pillar. Practices that do not follow this risk creating barriers to care, indicating a need for better staff training.

Regional data findings:

This section explores key regional data that illustrates the barriers to healthcare access for vulnerable populations in Waltham Forest. By focusing on issues such as bureaucratic literacy, digital inclusion, housing insecurity, and language competency, we can better understand the challenges residents face when trying to access GP services.

1. Population diversity and language competency

Waltham Forest is one of the most diverse boroughs in London:
- 39% [1] of Waltham Forest residents were born outside of the UK.
- 22% [2] of households do not primarily speak English at home, with languages like Romanian, Urdu, Bulgarian, Polish, and Turkish being commonly spoken. [3]
- English proficiency varies, with 5% of residents reporting that they speak English "not well" or "not at all".

This diversity highlights the need for GP practices to offer language support and ensure services are accessible for those with varying levels of English competency. Complex registration processes without language assistance can prevent individuals from accessing healthcare in a timely manner.

[2]https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/population/languages
[1] https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/population/country-birth#:~:text=Around%20one%20in%20four%20(39,the%20England%20average%20(17%25).
[3]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/theinternationalstudentpopulationinenglandandwalescensus2021/2023-04-17

Regional data findings:

2. **Bureaucratic literacy and its impact on access**

In addition to language barriers, many residents face bureaucratic literacy challenges when dealing with healthcare systems. This refers to the ability to understand and navigate complex administrative processes. National research shows that:

- In England, 16.4% [4] of adults, or 7.1 million people, can be described as having "very poor literacy skills", meaning they may struggle with filling out forms or understanding bureaucratic terms used in healthcare.
- In Waltham Forest, this issue is compounded by cultural differences in understanding what is required to access healthcare, with many residents unfamiliar with UK administrative procedures.

[4] https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/#:~:text=In%20England%2C%2016.4%25%20of%20adults,from%20unfamiliar%20sources%2C%20or%20on

Regional data findings:

3. **Digital inclusion and bureaucratic literacy**

Digital access is another significant barrier in Waltham Forest. As GP practices increasingly move toward online registration, digital literacy and internet access become critical for healthcare access. However, local data shows:

- 7%[5] of households in Waltham Forest do not have access to the internet.
- 10%[6] of adults in the UK are internet "non-users", which refers to those who have never used the internet or last used it more than 3 months ago.

In addition to lacking access, many residents face bureaucratic literacy challenges when dealing with complex forms online, making digital exclusion a multifaceted issue. Residents who are unable to complete online registration are often left with few alternatives, underscoring the need for in-person options and support from GP practices.

[5]https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/State%20of%20the%20Borough%20Report.pdf

[6]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04

Regional data findings:

4. Homelessness and housing instability

Housing instability is a critical issue in Waltham Forest, with many residents living in insecure or temporary housing. These individuals often lack the necessary documentation, such as utility bills, to provide proof of address when registering with a GP. Local data from Shelter and the Waltham Forest Council shows:

- In 2022, approximately 9 in 1,000 [7] residents in the borough were affected by homelessness.

- Many of these households are in temporary shelters, hostels, or unstable housing, making it difficult to meet the standard proof of address requirements that some GP practices ask for.

- Some residents that would not normally be captured by homelessness statistics may also have difficulties providing proof of address; for example lodgers subletting rooms informally.

These statistics indicate the need for GP practices to be more flexible in their registration processes, as outlined by the Safe Surgeries initiative, to ensure that individuals without stable housing can access healthcare services without unnecessary barriers.

Regional data findings:

5. Health inequalities and the impact of barriers

Waltham Forest faces significant health inequalities, with higher-than-average rates of chronic health conditions. Vulnerable populations, particularly those facing language and housing barriers, are disproportionately affected. According to data:

- 7.1% [8] of adults in Waltham Forest have been diagnosed with diabetes, compared to the London average of 6.6%.

- The Borough has one of the highest rates of cardiovascular disease in London, affecting 1.8% [9] of adults.

- Over 23%. [10] of residents aged 16 and over report mental health concerns, particularly within migrant communities.

These health conditions often require regular GP appointments for management and early intervention. However, barriers such as bureaucratic literacy, lack of proof of address, and language challenges can delay access to care, leading to worsening conditions and increased reliance on emergency services.

[8]https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/long-term-conditions/diabetes#:~:text=In%202021%20to%202022%2C%207.1,London%20as%20whole%20(6.8%25).
[9]https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/long-term-conditions/coronary-heart-disease#:~:text=In%202021%20to%202022%2C%20the,the%20regional%20average%20(1.9%25).
[10]https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/public-health-strategies-and-policies/making-every-contact-
count

Regional data findings:

Conclusion:

The regional data shows that a large portion of Waltham Forest's population faces significant barriers to accessing GP services due to language competency, bureaucratic literacy, digital exclusion, and housing instability. These factors highlight the urgent need for GP practices to adopt inclusive registration policies that do not require proof of address or ID, provide language support, and offer alternatives for patients unable to navigate complex forms or digital systems.

By addressing these barriers, GP practices can ensure that healthcare is accessible to all residents, particularly the most vulnerable, aligning with the principles of the Safe Surgeries initiative and the Good Care Framework.

Recommendations:

1.Train reception staff on inclusive registration practices

- GP practices in Waltham Forest should ensure that all staff, particularly receptionists, receive training on NHS guidelines regarding patient registration. This should include the fact that ID, proof of address, or immigration status are not required to register with a GP.
- Partnering with organisations such as Doctors of the World to provide Safe Surgery training can ensure that staff are well-equipped to deal with vulnerable populations.

2.Review and update practice websites

- GP surgeries must ensure that their websites clearly state that patients do not need proof of ID or address to register. Websites should also mention their participation in the Safe Surgeries initiative if applicable, and provide easy access to registration forms and other resources in multiple languages.
- Surgeries should ensure that online registration options do not create barriers for those without digital access or literacy.

Recommendations:

3. **Expand the safe surgeries initiative**

- All GP practices in Waltham Forest should proactively adopt and implement the Safe Surgeries initiative, ensuring they actively remove barriers for migrants, refugees, and other vulnerable groups. This could involve eliminating the requirement for ID, offering alternative ways to prove residency, and creating welcoming environments for all patients.
- Regular monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to ensure that the initiative is being followed in practice, not just in policy.

Recommendations:

4.Improve access for non-English speakers

- Practices should offer language support services, either through translators or language resources, for patients who may struggle with English. This would align with both the Good Care Framework's pillar of person-centred care and the Accessible pillar.

5.Promote public awareness campaigns

- Healthwatch Waltham Forest, in collaboration with local healthcare providers, could lead campaigns to inform residents, especially vulnerable groups, about their rights to access healthcare without needing proof of address or immigration status. This could include distributing flyers, using social media, and community outreach events.

Recommendations:

6. **Strengthen collaboration between practices and local services**

- Encourage partnerships between GP surgeries and community organisations that support vulnerable populations, such as migrant support groups, housing organisations, and local charities. This collaboration could improve referral pathways and ensure patients receive the support they need beyond primary care.

7. **Address digital exclusion**

- GP surgeries should offer alternatives to online registration to avoid excluding patients who do not have access to the internet or are unfamiliar with technology. Practices should maintain paper registration options and have staff available to help patients register in person.

Recommendations:

8. **Use welcoming language to encourage registration**

- Reception staff should be trained to use inclusive and welcoming language when interacting with individuals who wish to register, making it clear that proof of address or photo ID is not required for registration. By openly communicating this policy, staff can reassure patients, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, that lacking documentation will not prevent them from accessing care.

Conclusion:

The findings of this report highlight significant barriers to registering with GP practices in Waltham Forest, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrants and those without regular documentation. Despite NHS guidelines that clearly state proof of ID and address are not required for registration, many GP practices continue to ask for these, either through phone inquiries or on their websites.

The Good Care Framework, developed with input from local residents, provides a lens through which we can evaluate healthcare services in Waltham Forest. Our findings indicate that while some practices offer trustworthy and person-centred care, others fall short on accessibility and competency. This creates an uneven landscape of healthcare access, with some of the most vulnerable members of our community facing unnecessary barriers.

Conclusion:

Proactively adopting and implementing the Safe Surgeries initiative across all GP practices in the borough is an essential step toward ensuring that every resident, regardless of their background or circumstances, can access the healthcare they need. Additionally, improving staff training, updating practice websites, and addressing digital exclusion will contribute to a more inclusive healthcare system.

By ensuring that vulnerable groups can easily register and access primary care, the borough can help prevent minor health issues from escalating into serious conditions that require costly emergency treatment. When patients receive timely care through their GP, they are less likely to end up in A&E with advanced health problems, ultimately saving money and resources for the NHS.

By working together with local authorities, healthcare providers, and community organisations, Waltham Forest can become a leader in healthcare accessibility and equity. It is crucial that the borough's GP practices take action to align their policies with national guidelines and the principles of the Good Care Framework to ensure everyone can receive timely, compassionate, and equitable care.