

On Friday 19 October, the [Kent Messenger](#) reported and commented on the fact that more than 30 GP practices across the county continue to use and adopt banned 084 telephone numbers - see [images from the paper](#).

The investigation which led to this report was prompted by [a detailed briefing](#) issued on 7 September 2012 by the **fair telecoms** campaign.

Failure by NHS officials

NHS Kent and Medway (the Primary Care Trust) is reported to have been unable to enforce the terms of the contract revisions which came into effect on 1 April 2010, because someone was misled about telephone call charges. The quoted comment indicates that the Primary Care Trust is still confused about the issue, because it fails to recognise that subscribers to **the most widely used telephone tariff in the UK - BT Unlimited Anytime - pay vastly more** to call 0844 numbers than to call geographic numbers.

New use of these numbers was effectively banned from 1 April 2010. Practices already using them were given 12 months grace, in which to take the necessary "reasonable steps".

After 2½ years the PCT claims to be still working with the **Local Medical Committee**, representing the GPs, "to find a resolution". It has only 6 months of life left before the NHS Commissioning Board takes over this responsibility. The problem continues to grow with further practices adopting 0844 numbers, most recently in Herne Bay on 31 August 2012.

The two tier NHS

The most appalling aspect of this matter, reported by the [Kent Messenger](#), is the PCT's decision to recommend that surgeries offer a geographic number alongside the 0844 number. This is the "two tier NHS", which many feared could be a consequence of the "NHS reforms", although it is not permitted by the new Act of Parliament.

It is however reported here as being recommended, not by GPs, not by outside commercial interests, but by the body at the heart of the local NHS.

The 0844 number is said to provide "additional options and lines" and other "improved services", but at a premium cost. These facilities would be offered alongside a basic service on a geographic number, giving patients the choice of paying to get a better service from their NHS GP.

This is exactly the "choice" that the less well-off feared. The NHS was founded to remove the choice between the best possible healthcare and other personal expenditure.

We may only be talking about nothing worse than a £5 phone bill to call your GP (if you want to be able to get through), but there is a very important point of principle at stake here. Use of expensive telephone numbers has been banned anyway! The PCT is recommending that GPs not only breach the explicit terms of their contract, but also that they do so in a way that breaches a fundamental principle of the NHS.

The simple cure

If a practice thinks it worthwhile to take advantage of the additional facilities available with non-geographic numbers, it can do so by adopting, or migrating to, a 03 number. The cost of calling every 03 number is the same, for all callers, as that of calling a geographic number.

A 03 number offers total compliance with the terms of the GP contract, which simply demands that the number used must cause no-one to pay more than the cost of an equivalent call to a geographic number. **Ofcom** regulations, and noted compliance with these by all telephone companies, provide practices with the necessary assurance.

The provider of the system used by all of the 084 Kent GPs offers migration to the 0344 equivalent number of the 0844 number in use (a single digit number change is all that is required). This migration is normally possible without penalty during the term of an arrangement, as **Ofcom** ensures that the provider's interests are fully protected and the switch over has no effect on the technical aspects of the telephone service.

There is no evidence to show that the provider in question deviates from the standard industry approach in this respect, nor is there any good reason why it should.

GPs who claim that their requests to migrate to the equivalent 0344 number, within the terms of their arrangement, are being refused must produce clear evidence to support this allegation against their provider, **Surgery Line**, a member of the "**Daisy Group**". This is a highly reputable company; its Chief Executive, **Matthew Riley**, is an associate of **Lord Sugar**, selected to sit on the final judging panel for "**The Apprentice**".

A message from the fair telecoms campaign - to the people of Kent

The ignorance shown by your Primary Care Trust, its failure to enforce the terms of hard-won national contract revisions and its now blatant encouragement of a clear breach of the principles of the NHS should make us feel unwell also.

We find that we need very strong stomachs, as Kent is not alone. We understand that **Amanda Fadero**, the newly appointed NHS Director for the neighbouring area of "**Sussex and Surrey**" is behaving in a very similar manner to that of your existing Chief Executive, **Ann Sutton** and your newly appointed Area Director, **Felicity Cox**.

We hope that, with our continuing support, your media, MPs, Councillors and LINK will be able to explain that the NHS is still valued in Kent and its officers are still expected to defend its principals in the interests of the people they serve.

My message to Ann Sutton, Felicity Cox and those able to bear on them

On reading the quoted comments attributed to **NHS Kent and Medway**, I have written a detailed open message addressed to Mss Sutton and Cox, which is [published here](#). This develops many of the points made above.