



Following an item in one of the “Kent Messenger Group” papers two weeks ago, there has been further coverage of the story across the county. The following pages hold images of what was published.

- Click on the newspaper title and edition date below to view the image.
- Click on the image to visit a digital rendering of the paper. (Readers may need to work their way around the options available.)



[*Kent Messenger Maidstone*](#)
[*19 October*](#)

The first item published in response to a **fair telecoms campaign** [briefing](#), following a broadcast on [South East Today](#).



[*Kent Messenger Maidstone*](#)
[*2 November*](#)

A letter from a reader is published, expressing thanks for the previous item and making further points.



[*Kentish Express Ashford*](#)
[*1 November*](#)

Comments from readers are reported and further comments are invited.



[*Dartford Messenger*](#)
[*1 November*](#)

This includes a comment from a GP who is waiting for the government to tell them to stop using expensive telephone numbers.



[*Herne Bay Gazette*](#)
[*1 November*](#)

Comments are published from the PCT, the GP which adopted a new 0844 number in August 2012 and from the **fair telecoms campaign**.

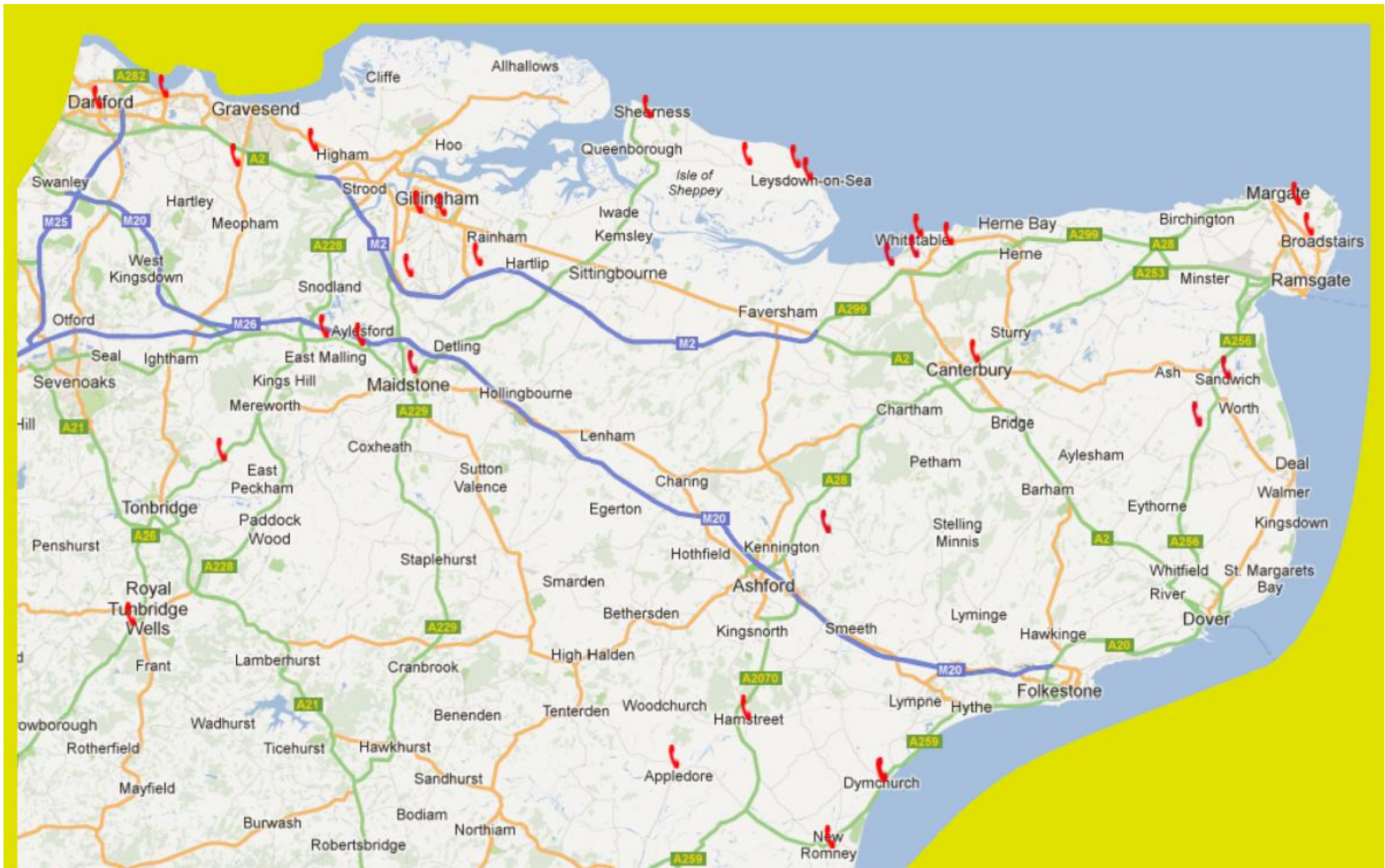
The list of GPs

[Click here for the list](#) of practices and surgeries published as part of the briefing, used by the KM journalists.

[See below a map](#) of the county with the expensive GP telephones shown in red. ➤ Click on the map to view the live version with links to the detail.

“Two tier NHS”

This issue of principle, with reference to the NHS Constitution, is at the heart of many of the concerns - see [this briefing](#).





74 Friday, October 19, 2012 Kent Messenger (KM)

MESSENGER COMMENT

GP phone cost makes us sick

MOST of us are struggling to cope with rising household bills. Juggling steep living costs against an ever-decreasing budget is becoming more and more tricky.

But when avoidable charges relate to contacting your GP surgery, it's enough to make anyone sick.

How could additional costs just to seek help or make a doctor's appointment have ever been justified?

The sick should not be penalised for who knows where such a policy would end – B&B charges for hospital stays?

Prescription charges, parking at hospitals, lotions, potions and pills are all money-draining essentials many have little option other than to pay out for if they're not exempt.

But up to 40p per minute to make an appointment or ask for advice is one health care remedy which is particularly hard to swallow.

You'd expect to pay those sort of fees for premium-rate competition lines but that's through choice and not need.

It is morally wrong to charge a person to call for medical help and some urgent attention is needed to cure the system of this ill.

In 2009, the Department of Health prohibited surgeries from installing an 084 line and asked those already operating a premium line to review their contracts.

The guidance did not go far enough, it should have been outlawed, because despite the directive many GPs have continued to operate the galling call-charging system.

It's one practice that should be abolished.

'Up to 40p per minute to ask for advice is one health care remedy which is hard to swallow'

YOUR KENT MESSENGER



084... Aylesford Medical centre



084... St Luke's Medical Centre



084... Larkfield Health Centre

GPs will have to find a cure for costly phone calls

by Anna White
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DISGRUNTLED patients have registered a common complaint with their GPs – expensive telephone numbers.

Unhappy NHS users have complained that more and more surgeries force them to dial 0844 to make an appointment or seek medical advice.

Callers have to pay around an extra 5p a minute when they phone the premium rate number from a landline – and up to an astonishing 40p per minute on mobiles.

At least three GPs in Maidstone and Malling use the 084 code, including St Luke's Medical Centre in Holland Road, Thornhills Medical Practice, Martin Square, Larkfield, and Aylesford Medical Centre, Admiral Moore Drive.

There are more than 30 other practices across Kent which have similar contracts.

In 2009, the Department of Health announced all NHS providers are prohibited from using telephone numbers which charge patients more than the equivalent cost of calling a standard number.

Surgeries tied into a contract with an 0844 provider had until December 2010 to review their



More than 30 surgeries in Kent are using 084 numbers

Picture: Claran Griffin

position and take steps to meet the new criteria.

Thornhills Medical Practice has applied to revert to the area's standard 01732 code and Susan Smith, manager at St Luke's Medical Centre, said it too is considering changing the number.

Christian Nelson, practice manager at Thornhills, said: "We had complaints from our patients about having to pay more, we listened and are due to change our number soon."

Aylesford Medical Centre was unable to comment at the time of going to press.

Thornhills patient Ron Edwards, from Ditton, was delighted to learn the call charging system would soon stop.

Mr Edwards and his wife Betty, both 86, are housebound.

He said: "I have been part of a

group of people who have been campaigning against these call charges.

"It's severely unfair how people who rely on medical help are charged expensive rates."



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PREMIUM RATE

Patients' anger at price of calls



PAGE 7

'We're working to solve the problem'

SURGERIES in Kent and Medway are monitored by the area's Primary Care Trust.

A spokesman for the service said: "Some surgeries took out contracts for 084 numbers several years ago because the call management systems enabled GPs to improve their service to patients.

"However it was not made clear that calls from providers other than BT or from mobile phones could cost more.

"We are currently working with the Kent Local Medical Committee and the remaining practices that have 084 numbers to find a resolution.

"Some surgeries have installed an additional geographical number and we will be looking to recommend this type of arrangement."

The spokesman added that some surgeries opted for an 084 code because it allowed them to add various options and lines.



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Friday, November 2, 2012 **95p**

LETTERS to the editor

Numbers game is costing patients dear

I WOULD like to thank the KM for publishing the article GPs Will Have To Find A Cure For Costly Phone Calls (October 19) and congratulate Anna White on its accuracy.

A journalist researches detail and gets it right, so why is it that NHS Kent and Medway get it so wrong when it is their job to enforce the GP Contract Variation issued by Parliament regarding these premium rate numbers to take effect from April 1, 2010?

Kent and Medway PCT Cluster has decided to disregard elements of a Contract Variation that is legally enforceable, by failing to require practices that already have 0844 numbers 'to take all reasonable steps' to ensure that callers pay no more than the cost of a call to a geographic number.

One 'reasonable step' available to all is to migrate to 0344 within the terms of their Telephone System Provider Contract. This alternative number is accepted on all call plans and mobiles in the same way as a geographic number.

Allowing eight surgeries to take new 0844 contracts as recently as August, this year, is a complete dereliction of duty.

It is not acceptable for an 0844 number to run alongside a geographic number, but if a geographic number is adopted the 0844 number must be switched off immediately and there can be no more. Once again our NHS officials are neglecting their duty of care to the people of Kent.

Ann, by email

PREMIUM RATE CHARGES CAN COST UP TO 40P A MINUTE EXTRA FROM MOBILES

Number up for phone calls which cause patients pain

by Tim Collins

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NHS patients have registered a common complaint with their GPs – expensive telephone numbers.

Unhappy NHS users have complained that dozens of surgeries are offering no other choice but to dial 0844 when they want to make an appointment or seek medical advice.

Callers have to pay around an extra 5p a minute when they phone the premium rate number from a landline – and up to an astonishing 40p per minute on mobiles.

In 2009, the Department of Health announced all NHS providers were prohibited from using telephone numbers charging patients more than the equivalent cost of calling a standard number.

But as many as 30 practices around Kent still use the 0844 code, including a number in the Ashford, Folkestone and Romney Marsh areas.

Surgeries tied into a contract with an 0844 provider had until December 2010 to review their position and take the steps to meet the new criteria.

A number of surgeries have yet to revert to a standard local phone code, but among those who have is Charing Surgery.

About the decision to drop 0844, prac-

tice manager Tony Gooden said: "Ironically, we were trying to improve the phone service we could offer patients by taking up 0844 in the first place."

"There were companies out there offering specialised phone systems that enable all calls to be answered automatically."

"It just so happened that these services were being offered on these 0844 numbers."

"It was unclear at the time that this would end up costing people more."

"In the end, we decided to drop them because of the weight of patient disapproval and I think we saw the writing on the wall, in terms of the guidance that would be issued from the powers that be."

■ **What do you think? Write to Kentish Express, 34-36 North Street, Ashford, TN24 8JR or email kentishexpress@thekmggroup.co.uk**



GUIDANCE: Charing surgery has already stopped using the 0844 prefix for patients

You said it on facebook

■ **Julia Halls said:** "My doctor's phone number is an 0844 and they put you on hold most of the time so it gets expensive."

■ **Claire Carter said:** "My nan's got no landline, so on a mobile it's even worse! She's got health problems and finds it difficult to contact the doctors."

■ **Linda Evans said:** "It seems wrong that they use these numbers for their own gain, especially when there are

times when patients have to wait a long time to speak to someone."

■ **Allison Sullivan said:** "They say it is lower than the cost of a normal phone call, but when you get inclusive calls in your phone package it isn't cheaper as most inclusive calls don't cover 0844."

■ **Carole McMullan said:** "Hamstreet uses the 0844 number, although we can make appointments online which is a better option."



CALLED OUT: Surgeries are being told to drop high-cost lines

Care trust has its finger on the problem

SURGERIES in Kent and Medway are monitored by the area's Primary Care Trust.

A spokesman for the trust said: "Some surgeries took out contracts for 084 numbers several years ago because the call management systems enabled GPs to improve their service to patients."

"However, it was not made clear that calls from providers other than BT or from mobile phones could cost more."

"We are working with the Kent Local Medical Committee and the remaining practices that have 084 numbers to find a resolution to this problem."

"Some surgeries have installed an additional geographical number and we will be looking to recommend this type of interim arrangement."

The spokesman added some surgeries opted for an 084 code because it allowed them to add various options and lines.

Surgeries still using 0844 dialling codes

A number of surgeries in the area still have 0844 numbers. These include:

■ **Appledore Surgery.** Contract said to expire in December 2013

■ **Dr Cawdron B.A., Dymchurch.** 0844 number adopted after implementation of ban

■ **Dr R.F. Cullen Partners, New Romney and Dymchurch.** Contract said to expire in October 2013

■ **Hamstreet Surgery.** Contract said to expire in December 2013

■ **Oaklands Health Centre, Hythe.** Contract said to expire in December 2013

■ **Wye Surgery.** 0844 number adopted after implementation of ban

'We decided to drop them because of the weight of patient disapproval'

Working towards a resolution

According to Kent's Primary Care Trust, which monitors the areas surgeries, some practices took out contracts for the 0844 numbers some years ago because the call management systems enabled GPs to improve their service to patients by adding various options and lines.

A spokesman said: "It was not made clear that calls from providers other than BT or from mobile phones could cost more.

"We are currently working with the Kent Local Medical Committee and the remaining practices that have 0844 numbers to find a resolution to this problem.

"Some surgeries have installed an additional geographical number and we will be looking to recommend this type of interim arrangement."

'It was not made clear that calls from providers other than BT or from mobile phones could cost more'

GPS CONTINUE TO USE EXPENSIVE SYSTEM DESPITE 2009 NHS DIRECTIVE

Many surgeries still use premium rate numbers

by Lizzie Massey
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SOME patients in Dartford and Gravesend are still facing the high costs of calling their GPs on premium rate phone numbers.

Unhappy NHS users have complained that as many as 30 surgeries across Kent are offering no choice, but to dial expensive 0844 numbers when they want to make an appointment or seek medical advice.

These include two practices in Gravesend, two in Dartford and one in Greenhithe.

In 2009, the Department of Health announced all NHS providers were prohibited from using telephone numbers charging patients more than the equivalent cost of calling a standard number.

Surgeries tied into a contract with an 0844 provider had until December 2010 to review their position and take the steps to meet the new criteria.

But many are still using the system.

Horsmans Place surgery in Instone Road, Dartford, uses Daisy Communications for the practice's direct line.



More than 30 surgeries across Kent are still using the premium rate 0844 numbers

The surgery's finance manager Tony Mulville said: "Our provider has a number in place for us to use immediately, if such demands were made by the government [to drop the premium rate number]."

Mr Mulville declined to make any comment on why this number was not in use now, but added: "Until the govern-

ment directs us that we have to change, we are happy staying with the current system."

Callers have to pay about an extra 5p a minute when they phone the premium rate number from a landline, and up to 40p per minute on mobiles.

Practice manager Ian Devonshire, at Dartford East Surgery on Pilgrims Way, where they also

'Until the government directs us that we have to change, we are happy staying with the current system'

have an 0844 number, declined to make any comment on the issue and was unable to say whether there were plans to change.

Dr Jayesh Rajnikant Ambal Patel and his partners have surgeries in Worcester Close in Istead Rise and Crown Lane in Shorne, both of which use the premium rate numbers. No one was available to comment before the Messenger went to press.

The practice manager at Ivy Bower Surgery on London Road, Greenhithe, was also unavailable for comment, but a receptionist said the surgery had changed the number due to security issues.

For this reason the surgery would not be considering changing to a local dialing number.

'Patients will not pay more'

Stephen Ingram, Associate Director of Primary Care, NHS Kent and Medway, said: "NHS Kent and Medway agrees that patients should not pay more to call their GP practice than they would to make equivalent calls to a geographical number.

"Our Primary Care Contracting Team wrote to practices in line with the regulations. Practices in Kent and Medway who were using 084 telephone numbers were asked to confirm that they had reviewed their arrangements with their current supplier, as required by the regulations, and were satisfied that patients will not pay more than they would to make equivalent calls to a geographical number.

"Our understanding is that use of 084 numbers is not a breach of the contract regulations as long as practices are able to provide evidence of compliance on request.

"We were concerned that Park Surgery entered an 084 contract in August 2012. We are seeking assurances from the practice that their arrangement complies with the regulations".

GPs' surgeries still use premium phone lines

by Gerry Warren
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PATIENTS of many GP surgeries in the district are still having to call premium telephone lines to make appointments, says the Fair Telecoms campaign group.

A new survey reveals seven medical practices are using 0844 numbers, which it claims is in breach of contracts with the primary care trust agreed in April 2010 banning their use.

Campaigner leader David Hickson says that except for a few specific cases, most callers will always pay more – between four and five pence a minute – than they would if they were making an equivalent call to a geographic code number.

He says the most recent example of practices ignoring the rules is the Park Surgery and Herne and Broomfield Surgery in Herne Bay, which only introduced its 0844 phone system in August this year.

But manager Hannah Walker insisted the practice was playing fair with patients and had only installed the system to try to ensure they could get through to the surgeries.

She claimed some callers would even find it cheaper to phone in, depending on their personal call plans.

She said: "We have to use a very

expensive phone system to cope with the volume of calls and ensure that patients can get through to us. But we are aware of the issue which is why we also have an 01227 number so patients have a choice."

She admitted there was a small premium of "less than 2p a minute" but said it only contributed a fraction towards the cost of the new call-queuing telephone system.

She said: "I called the number from my mobile and was able to get through and complete a call for about nine pence. But it is a trial and we want to hear what patients have to say after it has bedded in."

Practice manager at the Northgate Medical Practice in Canterbury Lisa Chapman said patients had identified getting through to the surgery promptly on the phone as a priority and the system was needed to handle up to 600 calls a day.

She said the practice was in contact with the primary care trust over its arrangements and waiting for guidance.

But Mr Hickson insists the practices are in "clear breach" of the rules because most callers using the 0844 numbers would always pay more. He also believes they have had long enough to take the steps required to change their arrangements.

Factfile

THE doctors' surgeries currently using 0844 numbers;

Northgate Medical Practice, Canterbury, Whitstable Health Centre, Chestfield Medical Centre, Saddleton Road Surgery, Whitstable, Seasalter Surgery, Park Road Surgery, Herne Bay and Herne and Broomfield Surgery.

