

With effect from 1 April 2010, NHS GP contracts were amended, to include [the following](#):

“The Contractor shall not enter into, renew or extend a contract or other arrangement for telephone services unless it is satisfied that, having regard to the arrangement as a whole, persons will not pay more to make relevant calls to the practice than they would to make equivalent calls to a geographical number.”

With the exception of some landline users who may pay an inflated “penalty charge” to call a geographic number outside the terms of their selected call plan, calls to 0844 numbers invariably cost more than equivalent calls to geographic numbers. This is because the call charge includes a “Service Charge” of around 5p per minute, which provides a subsidy towards the cost of the practice telephone system.

See this [summary of call charges](#) from published tariffs for the most commonly used telephone services (the numbers given below are both 'type g11'). See [more detail here](#).

Two new cases

These two recent cases represent clear breaches of the simple requirement not to use such numbers. Ill considered attempts to wriggle out of this responsibility are however seen.

(Click on the image to view the website)

	<h2 style="text-align: center;">Northgate Village Surgery</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">Tel: 08443 878396</p>	<p>Northgate Avenue Chester CH2 2DX</p>
<p>New Surgery Telephone Number</p> <p>As from the 4th October 2012, our surgery will have a new telephone system which we hope will help us to deal with your calls more efficiently.</p> <p>The Number is 08443 878396.</p> <p>When possible, please call us from a landline or check with your mobile provider for the cost to you. One of our old numbers will be kept for a time but please be aware that this line will not place you into the new systems queue so there may be a delay answering your call.</p>		

Park Surgery

116 King's Road, Heme Bay, Kent, CT6 5RE

CHANGE OF PHONE NUMBER

News Posted on August 9, 2012

We are moving to a single phone number for both Surgeries. The new number will be 08443 879933 (charged at BT local rate). If you prefer you can dial 01227 742568 for Park Surgery or 01227 749678 for Broomfield Surgery, (charged as per your plan for local calls). This will take effect from Friday 24th August at Park Surgery and Thursday 30th August at Broomfield Surgery. There may be some disruption to the phone lines on Thursday 23rd and Thursday 30th August.

Clarification

For those who may be unaware, it must be understood that the distinct “BT local rate” was abolished in 2004. Since then local and national calls have been charged at a common “geographic rate”, which also applies to calls to 03 numbers. Previously “local rate” applied to some 0845 numbers for BT customers; it has never applied to 0844 numbers.

It is difficult to imagine how a GP, seeking to discover the relative cost of calling type g11 telephone numbers in 2012, could have gained a false understanding. One may suspect that this could only result from it being deliberately misled by someone with an interest.

Arguments

There are some who argue that those who do not pay a penalty charge to call a geographic number, but pay the Service Charge to call the 0844 number, may be deemed to fall outside “*the arrangement as a whole*”, as stated in the NHS GP contract. “Our NHS” is however an inclusive universal service which serves all, regardless of their particular telephone tariff. It certainly serves those who cannot afford a landline, or regularly use one during the day.

All are covered by the rights outlined in the NHS Constitution. Contracted GPs and PCTs are covered by a statutory obligation to “have regard to the NHS Constitution”. Again, one may only assume that a more limited interpretation of “the arrangement as a whole” could only be understood by a party outside the NHS, to whom this duty does not apply.

There are some who argue that NHS patients should be able to opt for a higher quality service if they choose to pay for it. This is used to defend a decision to offer a premium service, given that an alternative basic option is available.

Parliament expressly rejected the concept of choice based on price for the NHS when debating the Health and Social Care Act 2012. A “two tier NHS” has never been acceptable.

There may be some who are keen to see all patients pay towards the cost of providing “enhanced” NHS services, as they use them. They are entitled to their view and to make appropriate political representations for the NHS to be abolished or for individual nations (e.g. England) to opt out.

Despite stated intentions to replace a national service with one that is focussed on individuals, the principles of the NHS continue to govern publicly funded health services in England. It is for those who are charged with the duty of administering the NHS to ensure that these principles are not breached, regardless of their personal political views. This is unquestionably true when those principles are reflected in the terms of a contract.

All cases

I maintain [a database of GPs using 084 numbers](#), derived from NHS Choices for England. This is in the course of being updated. Please [contact me](#) for access to up-to-date details.