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# GP phone line reverts to 0118

## ›Appointments line was premium

By KAREN JORDAN

A GP PRACTICE which netted thousands of pounds from a premium rate appointment bookings line has reverted to an 0118 number.

The 35p-a-minute line may have cost patients close to an estimated £28,000 a year, which during the seven-year contract could have seen callers collectively forking out in the region of £200,000.

From Monday those wanting to make an appointment for the Brookside, Chalfont, and Winnersh surgeries, which form the Brookside Group Practice, can call (0118) 966 9333 rather than 0844 477 3005.

Members of Earley Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG) have been campaigning against the 0844 numbers at the practice for more than two years.

NAG chairman Jim Willis said: "We got them to agree to the switch after some fairly heavy lobbying.

"We wrote letters to, had conversations with, and attended meetings at the PCT (Primary Care Trust) and Department of Health to make this happen and I'm

pleased we got a result.

"We have saved people a lot of money they never should have been paying in the first place.

"In days of austerity, one has to consider every penny. And the NHS should not have these premium numbers – it's as simple as that. It was a difficult situation but we got it sorted."

Mike Parting, business manager at the practice, explained the surgeries had returned to 0118 because its contract with the 0844 operator expired.

Mr Parting added: "We are keeping the system, which our patients appear to be very happy with, but are using an 0118 number.

"The practice has invested a lot of money to provide a sophisticated system that deals with the calls for all three surgeries.

"The system is expensive to run and we won't make money using an 0118 number."

The Wokingham Times estimated callers would have been charged around £200,000 during the contract, based on each of the practice's 26,500 patients making three one-minute calls every year to their surgery.

If the practice only received a tiny proportion of this, they could have made a significant profit – 10 per cent equating to around £20,000.

Mr Parting would not confirm these figures, saying: "I have no comment as to whether the system is good value, but £20,000 would equate to £1 per patient per year."

In 2010, the Government introduced legislation banning surgeries from charging more than the local rate for calls.

The 0844 prefixes are still allowed if people are not charged more than the equivalent cost of calling a geographical number, but campaigners say callers dialling 0844 numbers from a mobile or fixed price plan can still find themselves paying more.

Two Woodley GP practices, Parkside and Woodley Health Centre, abandoned 0844 in 2010.

Mr Willis added: "The company that operates these premium phone lines NEG (Network Europe Group) is making an absolute killing on this.

"And the use of these numbers is widespread across the country."