

From The Surrey Advertiser, 24 December 2014

Sick and elderly patients queue from 7am at overcrowded health centre just to book appointment

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By Georgina Townshend

Sunbury Health Centre claimed Spelthorne Borough Council granting new housing developments has increased pressure on its surgery



Sunbury Health Centre patients queue at 7am in the morning

Desperate patients at an overcrowded doctor surgery in Sunbury are queuing from 7am to book an appointment. Sunbury Health Centre, in Green Street, was designed for 6,000 patients but says it currently has a list closer to 19,000 registered, making it one of the largest in the country. The surgery itself has estimated that by 2017 they will have a practice population of 23,000 patients.

In its most recent newsletter, Sunbury Health Centre states that: “Despite our concerns, Spelthorne Borough Council continues to grant planning permission and allow ‘new builds’ in the area, with no consultation with the practice.”

Gerry Cook, who took a photo of patients queuing in the dark from 7am on December 15, told *Get Surrey*: “What a grim experience. It was dark, damp and cold, and we had to queue in the open air in the car park for half an hour, in company with some very vulnerable-looking older folk and mothers with young babies. Only one counter was manned, and the dog-eared general appearance of the entrance area, when we eventually reached it, reminded me of Eastern Europe in the ‘60s.”

A spokesman for the practice has confirmed that, although there may be a queue on certain mornings, all patients who require an appointment will be seen or telephoned by a GP the same day. To combat the problem, the surgery have recently purchased four more telephone lines in an effort to improve the situation. Mr Cook, who has visited the practice since he moved to Sunbury in 1976, said: "The people in the queue were saying that it is the same everyday. The last time I was here was over a year ago, and it was the same then. I don't think it is acceptable, there were people in that queue that should not have been, but they clearly can't get an appointment any other way. The fact is at 7am there are people queuing in the dark, in all weathers, as they can't seem to get what they want over the phone."

GP shortage

Mike Rich, chief executive for Health Watch Surrey (HWS), said: "We at HWS recognise that getting a GP appointment in parts of Surrey can be a real problem, as underlined in our recent GP appointments report. We also know that there is currently a shortage of GPs which can exacerbate the problem. "HWS is currently working with NHS England to look at ways to improve the situation and we will be looking into this particular case as a matter of urgency." The health centre only rent 45% of the building with the other 55% being used by Virgin health care. HWS chairman Neil Huntingford said that NHS properties had attended the surgery, and agreed the property was "very small" for the patient population. A spokesman for NHS Property Services said: "As landlord, NHS Property Services is supporting NHS England in exploring options for improving this practice. It will be for NHS England to submit a business case for their preferred solution."

Mr Huntingford said: "The practice has a policy of not turning people away, as there are no other surgeries near-by. They are fully aware, and are trying their best to sort the issue. We have been told that the last meeting held with the NHS was encouraging, and that the overall feeling is positive that things are starting to move in the right direction. It is an issue of space. The surgery have the doctors, just not the space." A spokesman for the practice said: "In relation to developing the practice for the future we met with NHS Property Services and the local Council as planned. As a result of these positive meetings we will be submitting our requirements to enable a feasibility study to commence to examine various options to improve our premises or to develop an alternative site. "The results of this study and ultimately any bid for a premises improvement will have to be approved by NHS England."

NHS England said they are aware of the challenges faced by Sunbury Health Centre and is working closely with the practice to support them. Mr Cook added: "Now that the builders have started work on the London Irish site I suppose it won't be long before NHS will be squeezed into accommodating yet another thousand or so people - so presumably the queue can only get longer."

From The Daily Mail, 22 December 2014

The queue that shames Britain: 7.11am and desperate patients wait in the cold and dark outside surgery - just so they can be seen by their GP

By Tania Steere for the Daily Mail

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Shivering in the cold before dawn yesterday, more than 30 patients queue in the desperate hope of seeing a doctor. The scene, a bleak picture of a health service in crisis, is one repeated daily in many parts of the country. The patients lined up from 6.30am because it was their only hope of a same-day appointment with their GP at a heavily oversubscribed practice. The Sunbury Health Centre in Surrey is one of the biggest in Britain. Originally designed for 6,000 patients, it now serves nearly 19,000. Residents say the extra demand is a result of new housing developments springing up while few improvements have been made to health services. The surgery has 12 GPs, four of them recruited in the past two years to cope with increased demand, and hopes to recruit more. As its roll has increased, so has the NHS money flowing in – surgeries are paid £73.56 per patient, according to GP magazine Pulse.

But patients at Sunbury Health Centre say the phone is continuously engaged so it is ‘impossible’ to ring for an appointment. If they do manage to book by phone, they face a wait of up to two weeks to see a doctor.

Bleak: The patients lined up from 6.30am because it was their only hope of a same-day appointment with their GP at a heavily oversubscribed practice. The Sunbury Health Centre in Surrey is one of the biggest in Britain

The surgery is open weekdays from 7am until 6pm and like many across the country does not offer appointments in the evenings or at weekends – Labour’s 2004 changes to GP contracts allowed them to opt out of providing care outside office hours. Patients say the only option is to queue in the hope of seeing a doctor on the same day. Those queuing yesterday would otherwise not be seen until well into the new year. Retired nurse Sue Levi, 63, was trying to get an appointment for her

five-month-old grandson Ethan. She said: 'I'm queuing for my grandchild who is ill with bronchiolitis. You can't bring a sick baby to queue in the cold at 7am. The nearest surgeries other than this are miles away.'



Charlotte Cox, 36, an HR manager, said: 'It's absolutely ridiculous. It's the third time I've been down here in the past week. The first time I didn't manage to get an appointment, the second time I did but I had to stand in the rain and then again today. It's not right.'

Tina Zander, 50, a secretary, said: 'What if you are elderly and living on your own? You can't expect them to come and queue. The surgery can't take any more. It's disgusting. Chauffeur Mark Carr, 54, tried to book an appointment by phone but was told the earliest date was January 5. He said: 'I had no choice but to come down here. I've been here since 7am queuing. It's ridiculous.'

Waiting in line: Wrapped up against the cold, patients queue outside. They say the phone is continuously engaged so it is 'impossible' to ring for an appointment at this heavily subscribed health centre

The scene is not unique as GP surgeries across the country are being stretched to breaking point. In September the Mail reported NHS figures predicting that this year 58.9million GP appointments will have entailed a wait of a week or more – a rise of almost 50 per cent on 2012. And the queue in Sunbury may continue to grow unless something is done – the surgery expects a further 4,000 patients will sign up in the next three years. The practice has been lobbying for a new premises or money to redevelop the existing surgery. It said in its newsletter that it was trying to recruit more staff and doing its best to deliver 'excellent primary care'.

Kwasi Kwarteng, Tory MP for the Spelthorne constituency which includes Sunbury, said: 'We have been trying to work this out with NHS England and we have not got as far as I would like. It's bursting at the seams and it can't continue much longer.' A spokesman for Sunbury Health Centre said there had been an increase in patients seeking appointments before the Christmas holidays. It added: 'We are currently reviewing our system. Although there may be a queue on certain mornings, all patients who require an appointment will be seen or telephoned by a GP the same day.'



NHS England said: 'We are aware of the challenges faced by Sunbury Health Centre and we are working closely with the practice to support them.' Dr Maureen Baker, chairman of the Royal College of GPs, said: 'Every patient should be able to see their family doctor when they need to. Unfortunately, what we are seeing now is a sad consequence of the desperate shortage of GPs in many parts of the country.'

Some patients are bypassing GP surgeries to go to A&E, putting huge pressure on the emergency services. Last month Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt admitted taking his children to A&E over a weekend because he didn't want to wait for a GP appointment. A Conservative health spokesman said: 'Eighty-five per cent of patients say they can get access to a GP quickly, but we know services are under pressure – that's why a future Conservative government would guarantee seven-day access for everyone by 2020.'

Desperate: Patients say the only option is to queue in the hope of seeing a doctor on the same day. The scene pictured above is not unique as GP surgeries across the country are being stretched to breaking point