



Eastern and Coastal Kent

A Three-digit Number for Non-emergency Healthcare Services

NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent's response to an Ofcom consultation
August 2009

Introduction

NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent welcomes the development of effective ways for its local population to contact and engage with healthcare services.

In responding to the Ofcom consultation for the introduction of a three-digit number for non-emergency healthcare services, as proposed by the Department of Health, NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent wishes contribute the following comments.

The consultation questions

Question 1: Do you agree with Ofcom's view that the proposed non-emergency healthcare service represents a justified use of a three-digit number? Please give reasons for your views.

NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent believes the proposed non-emergency number for use by the public in engaging with healthcare services, is an appropriate use of a finite three-digit resource.

- As with the current justification for the 999 services, there is unlikely to be confusion regarding the service as a national resource.
- a 3 digit number promotes citizen and consumer interests as it will be more memorable which is particularly important in situations when patients and their carers need urgent advice and treatment and assists with reducing confusion around existing options. A new number could potentially reduce unnecessary calls to 999 or visits to A&E.

Question 2: Do you agree with the DH's view that a) a three-digit number is the best choice for the proposed service

NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent agrees a three digit-number is an effective and recognisable method for engagement with healthcare services, as found with the 999 service.

This view is taken because –

- Three-digit numbers hold meaning within the public for special services and in most cases those which are available 24/7/365.
- Unlike the current NHS Direct number, within the 0845 range, the use of a three-digit number would be clearly recognised and memorable by the public as a national service.
- Use of a three-digit number allows for implementation of an appropriate tariff model which could be consulted separately in the future and would

not be restricted by other generally known tariff models, for example 0845 for local calls or 0870 for national calls.

b) of the three-digit numbers available, '111' is the best option?

NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent believes the use of a '111' three-digit number for non-emergency services is an effective extension to the 999 number, however we highlight that the 999 service offers a range of several services not specifically healthcare, which would require effective awareness communication.

Question 3: What are your views on the tariff options selected by the DH?

NHS Eastern and Coastal Kent believes that as the service is of a non-emergency nature, it is appropriate for a form of tariff to exist but for this to be limited and transparent.

With the understanding that the Department of Health requires an initial tariff to be utilised for a three-digit service and with the potential for this to exclude low income groups in the Options 1 and 3, the preferred **Option 2** (10 pence per call) is considered the most transparent and most engaging, without a time sensitive pressure.

Note:

While cost is clearly a sensitive point we have considered that access to non-emergency healthcare services, unlike emergency situations, will in most cases exert some form of a cost to the individual outside the point of interaction. This would be directly comparable by the individual to accessing other forms of community-based services, for example local call charges, public transport, car parking charges, petrol and time.

Question 4: Do you have any comments on the proposed notification of modification to the Numbering Condition in Annex 8 of this document?

No comments.