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# Out-of-hours GP service praised

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A pilot service providing additional out-of-hours GP appointments in Suffolk has been praised for reducing pressure on A&E departments and improving winter healthcare.

Suffolk GP+, an NHS service providing GP appointments on evenings, weekends and bank holidays, has recorded more than 4,000 appointments since launching at Riverside Clinic in Landseer Road, Ipswich, in September and at the Swan Surgery in Northgate Business Park, Bury St Edmunds, last month.

Paul Driscoll, chairman of the Suffolk GP Federation, which is running the pilot, said the service has been a "success" and revealed the east Suffolk initiative could relocate to Ipswich Hospital.

The number of patients who used Suffolk GP+ in Ipswich alone rose from 831 in October to 1,231 in December – a rise of 48%.

A survey also found that 53% of patients would have waited for a GP



■ Ben Gummer MP gets a tour of GP Plus at the Riverside Clinic by Dr Paul Driscoll.

Photo: SU ANDERSON

appointment later in the week if the GP+ service was not available. Some 15% would have gone to A&E. The service was launched by the Prime Minister's Challenge Fund and given £2million funding. Dr Driscoll said: "Some of the other pilots have shown quite low take-up rates but we have

got a very good rate in Suffolk.

"We are taking patients from A&E who don't need to be there; certainly at least a few hundred. I think patients are confused what to do out-of-hours and some have tended to go to where they know and trust, which is A&E, inappropriately through no

fault of their own. But I think long-term our plan is to be located next to A&E, so when patients turn up for what is the wrong service, we can direct them across a corridor to a GP service."

He added: "Over Christmas, NHS 111 booked directly on to our service on weekends, which increased the number of patients we are seeing."

It comes after it was reported Suffolk patients face growing difficulties accessing GP appointments amid warnings the county's long-running recruitment crisis now poses "toxic" dangers to the service.

Dr Driscoll said: "The GP crisis is real and is not going to change any time soon. We need to encourage more GPs on to our GP training schemes and address some of the workload and bureaucracy elements of the job which are putting pressure on colleagues to retire early and affect the amount of time we can spend with our patients."

An Ipswich Hospital spokesman confirmed they are in talks to relocate Suffolk GP+ at the hospital.

## Weekend rail delays coming

Nearly three months of weekend disruption on the main line between East Anglia and London starts early next month.

Network Rail is carrying out major work between Shenfield and Stratford, meaning that the main line will be closed every weekend from February 6/7 until the middle of April.

Passengers travelling from East Anglia on Saturdays and Sundays will have to travel by train to Ingatestone from where they will be taken by bus to the Tube station at Newbury Park from where a Central Line train will take them into London.

The changes will add up to an hour each way on journeys to the capital.

The disruption will also close the lines for four days across Easter – March 25-28 inclusive – as engineers replace overhead lines, install new track, and make other improvements linked with the introduction of the new Crossrail service under the capital from 2018.