

'Status quo won't solve problem' of GP shortage

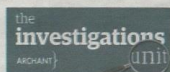
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The crisis facing primary health care in Suffolk reached new depths last night after it emerged two GP surgeries in the county had applied to close their patient lists.

NHS England confirmed the practices – both of which are based in Ipswich but have not been named – had sought temporary permission to stop accepting new patients because of sustainability issues.

It comes just months after three of the four GP practices in Clacton made similar applications to close their lists, with one doctor warning that the region's recruitment challenges posed the "very real possibility" of patients not being able to access services locally.

Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) said it was aware of the applications, though it stressed the move would



not affect any patients already registered with the practices.

A spokesman for the CCG highlighted concerns about the pressures faced by GP practices in the region.

"This situation reflects the ever-increasing demand on services from the expanding local population and the on-going difficulties in recruiting GPs and practice nurses," the spokesman added.

"Ever-increasing numbers of patients seeking treatment and too few resources is not a sustainable situation."

Ipswich MP Ben Gummer, who is also a health minister, acknowledged GPs across the country were under pressure, though he stressed the Government was "trying to do something about it".

Locally Mr Gummer said he had been encouraging surgeries to merge to create more capacity, highlighting the new Two Rivers Health Centre, being built in Woodbridge Road, east Ipswich, that would be "one of the best facilities for GPs anywhere in the country".

"This will make a huge improve-



■ Sarah Adams, Labour's health spokeswoman at Suffolk County Council.

“Here in rural Suffolk we are seeing a toxic mix of chronic under-funding and investment, hollow rhetoric around redesign of services along with growing demand

South Suffolk Labour party member Jane Basham, right

ment and I want to achieve similar facilities for other parts of the town,” she added.

“It means doctors can do a lot more to improve capacity by finding the

space for more health workers to work more effectively as well as creating a more comfortable place for patients.”

Reflecting on the national challenges, Mr Gummer said the Government's new GP contract

would bring in £250million in additional funding. He said a further 5,000 GPs would be recruited by 2020.

However, Jane Basham, a South Suffolk Labour party member, said the current situation “underlines the NHS crisis that has been created by



and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) have produced a 10-point plan with a view to building the workforce by a variety of methods.

“These include developing other health care professionals to work in primary care, for example clinical pharmacists, nurse practitioners and Physician Associates. NHS England and its local partners are committed to implementing this plan in the east.”

NHS England offers 'reassurance to patients'

Carole Theobald, Locality Director for NHS England (East), said: “We confirm that two surgeries in Ipswich have formally applied to NHS England to close their lists and these are now being considered in line with NHS England policy. NHS England recognises the difficulties the practices are facing and is working with them and Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group to determine how best to support them to bring about

long-term stability. NHS England also understands that two surgeries in Ipswich have taken the decision to temporarily suspend their lists to patient registrations.

“We would like to reassure patients that no-one will be left without access to high-quality primary care services.”

“GP recruitment is recognised to be a national issue and NHS England, Health Education England (HEE), the General Practitioners Committee (GPC)

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Existing patients 'unaffected'

A spokesman for NHS Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group said: “We are aware that several GP practices in Ipswich have applied to NHS England to temporarily stop accepting new patients. This would not affect any patients who are currently registered with a GP practice.

“The CCG is very concerned about the pressures being faced by GP practices. This situation reflects the ever-increasing demand on services from the expanding local population and the on-going difficulties in recruiting GPs and practice nurses.

“Ever-increasing numbers of patients seeking treatment and too few resources is not a sustainable situation.

“The priority is to ensure ongoing good care for patients and the CCG is working with GP practices, NHS England and all our partners to try to address the immediate and long-term challenges, including the recruitment and retention of health professionals across the area.

“Change is required and we actively support the development of different models of care and more collaboration between GP practices to ensure a sustainable future for primary care services.

“We continue to urge patients to use primary care services appropriately. Your help, by looking after you and your family and choosing self-care first, is vital. By making sure you've done everything for yourself, before you call your GP practice, will make a huge difference.”

■ Above: Dr Simon Rutland, who is based at Stowhealth surgery in Stowmarket. Left: a GP checking a patient's blood pressure, inset left: Ipswich MP Ben Gummer. Pictures: PAUL/AUDIA GANNON/PHIL MORTLEY

this Government and a lack of local political leadership”.

“Here in rural Suffolk we are seeing a toxic mix of chronic under-funding and investment, hollow rhetoric around redesign of services along with growing demand,” she added.

“The people of Suffolk are languishing on ever-lengthening waiting lists or being unable to access health services when they need it and our hard-working GPs and other health professionals deserve better.”

Simon Rutland, media lead at the Suffolk GP Federation, said the problems were part of nationwide workforce issues, but he stressed the federation was committed to ensuring local services remained sustainable.

“We are acutely aware of the need to try to support local GPs in Suffolk,” he added.

“We've been having consultations at meetings across Suffolk for the last six

months looking at different models of care, which would help us to sustain general practice and enable patients to receive care close to where they live.”

Speaking as a GP based at Stowhealth surgery in Stowmarket, Dr Rutland acknowledged the difficulties that emerged when a neighbouring surgery closed its patient list, particularly in coping with the demand from patients with complex health needs.

He said general practice was likely to change significantly in the coming years and warned that preserving the “status quo is not something that is going to solve these problems”.

He highlighted instead the need to look more widely at the “skills mix” of health care workers so that other professionals, such as pharmacists, nurses and physiotherapists, could play a greater role alongside GPs.

Sarah Adams, Labour's health spokeswoman at Suffolk County Council, said the

current situation demonstrated the need for primary care to undergo a “radical overhaul”.

“There's a huge difficulty in recruiting GPs in Suffolk and the whole way the system is set up does not work,” she added.

“The demand on services is proving all the time and it just cannot be fulfilled with the number of GPs we have working in the county – particularly with how elderly our population is becoming.

“I think there needs to be a radical overhaul for the whole of primary care – it cannot carry on like this.”

“The CCG is urging patients to use primary care services appropriately so as not to add to the demand.

“Your help, by looking after you and your family and choosing self-care first, is vital,” the spokesman added.

“By making sure you've done everything for yourself, before you call your GP practice, will make a huge difference.”