

New way to see a doctor

A REVOLUTION in how thousands of people in Farnham access GP services will take hold today (Thursday), with the launch of the Farnham Integrated Care Centre (ICC) - a brand new urgent care unit at the Farnham Centre for Health.

From June 1, patients of four of Farnham's largest GP surgeries - Downing Street, Farnham Dene, The Ferns and River Wey - seeking a same-day appointment will be redirected to the Farnham ICC, located in the community hospital's former renal dialysis unit.

The unit, which is the first of its kind in the UK, comes as part of the North East Hampshire and Farnham NHS Clinical Commissioning Group's drive to reduce hospital admissions and drive down GP waiting times under the NHS Vanguard scheme.

It is hoped the outsourcing of same-day appointments to the ICC will enable GPs at the four practices to spend more time addressing non-urgent patients' more complex health needs, reducing the need for repeat visits and ensuring all patients are provided with the most appropriate treatment.

The ICC will initially be staffed Monday to Friday by a whole team of health professionals - including three to five existing GPs from the four practices involved, social care teams and the community district nursing teams.

In addition, a heart failure nurse and community paramedics will be based in the centre, and other health professionals will use it on an 'as needed' basis. If the pilot scheme is successful, longer term there will be even more health professionals based there from different disciplines, and it is hoped to extend the service to Saturdays and the operating hours to 8am to 8pm.

The four practices involved - all rated 'good' by the Care Quality Commission - together provide

**By Chief
Reporter
Daniel Gee**

daniel.gee@
farnhamherald.com

health services to more than 40,000 people in Farnham and the surrounding area.

Under the changes, anyone registered at these surgeries requiring a same-day GP appointment will be asked to phone their practice as normal.

If a same-day appointment is then deemed necessary, they will be booked into the ICC or be given a telephone appointment with a relevant health care professional - be it a GP, nurse or another health worker such as a physio.

The change will not have any impact on routine 'non-urgent' appointments - other than to hopefully reduce waiting times to "a few days" instead of more than a week, as is often the case currently.

Jenny Partridge, practice manager at Farnham Dene, told *The Herald*: "The ICC is a way of better handling patients with urgent needs, and freeing up time in practice to see the people that can wait a few days.

"It's almost like a new GP clinic, and it doesn't exist anywhere else in the same way. Other places have set up ICCs before, but never with a number of different GP practices coming together like in Farnham. This is quite unique.

"Currently, each GP spends around 25 per cent of their time in any session seeing urgent patients - meaning they are left with only around five to ten minutes to see each person.

"But under the ICC, what will happen is GPs will take it in turns to see patients in the same-day service for one session a week, freeing up the rest of their sessions to concentrate on the people who need a bit more time.

"Our hope is that it will smooth out the process so

that people who really do need to be seen same-day will get that access and the treatment for it, and in the practices things will be calmer, and therefore doctors can spend longer with people with more complex longer-term issues."

Under the auspices of the Farnham Out of Hospital Care project, the four practices have secured funding from the NHS for additional staff to increase the capacity of the ICC, as well as a number of further projects to integrate services further at the Farnham Centre for Health.

However, because of the 'purdah' pre-election period, details of this funding or future schemes cannot be disclosed fully until after June 8.

Dr David Brown, lead GP for the Farnham Out of Hospital Care project and a partner at Farnham Dene, said: "We're hoping the ICC will improve the way things are done in terms of the resilience of the practices in being able to deliver an urgent care service.

"It certainly is a big change for us all to be working together in this way and the plan is to increase the capacity slightly by hiring additional staff. But it's not always easy recruiting GPs, that's one of the problems facing the profession.

"The workforce is limited, and despite the Government's attempts to recruit an extra 5,000 GPs, it hasn't happened and we're needing to look at different members of the workforce to work with us.

"The Farnham Out of Hospital Care project is broader than just general practice. It's trying to get us all to work together in a more connected way.

"Yes there are elements of it that are being forced upon us. But in Farnham we have a very positive 'can do' attitude, and we've embraced it because we actually see it as an opportunity to improve the way primary care is delivered."