

COVER STORY

Wheels come off seven-day GP access drive

Huge uncertainty remains over the Prime Minister's flagship election pledge to extend GP hours, finds **Sofia Lind**

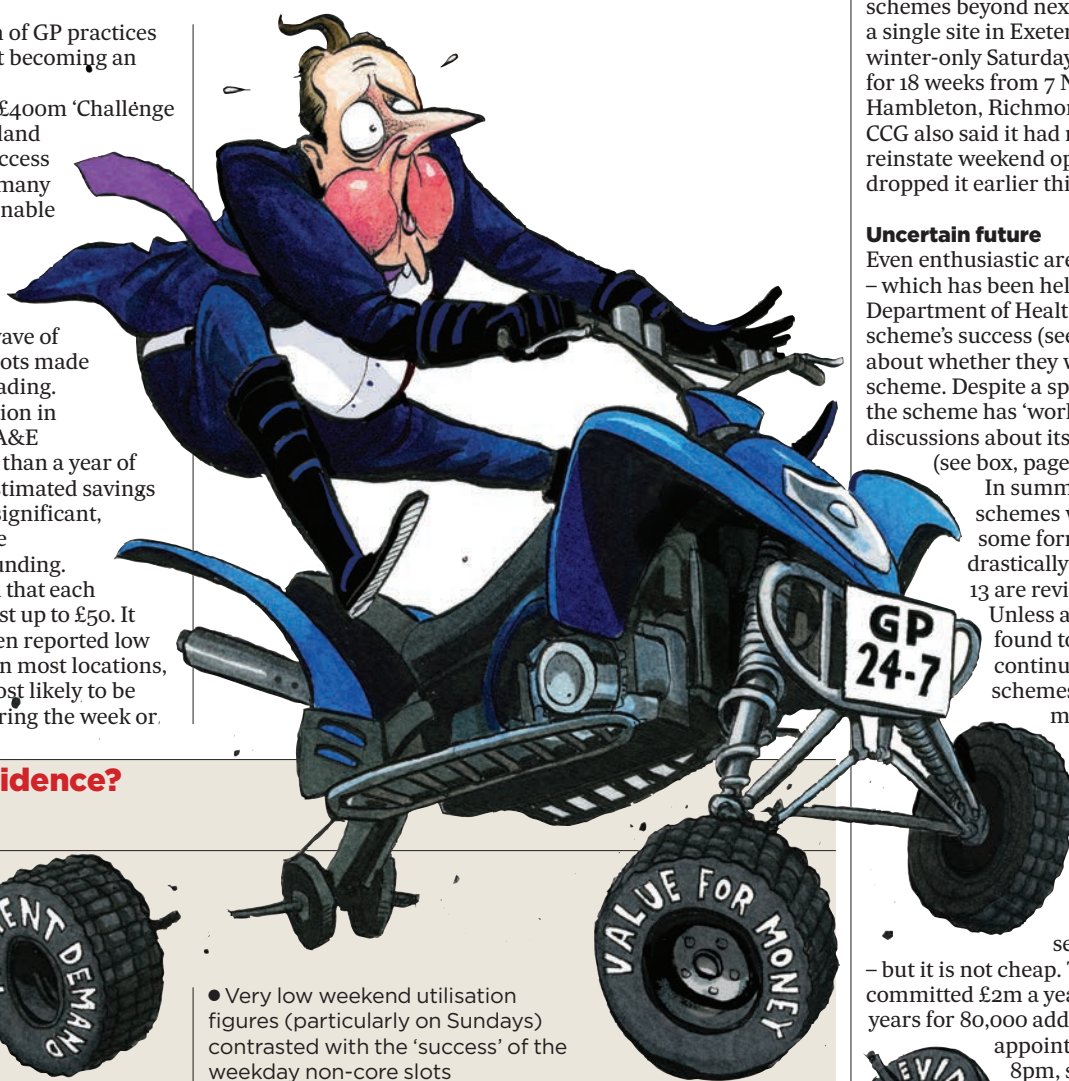
David Cameron's dream of GP practices opening all hours is fast becoming an expensive nightmare.

The first wave of his £400m 'Challenge Fund' pilots across England have tested seven-day access to GP practices and, in many cases, delivered questionable results.

Released with little fanfare last month, NHS England's official evaluation of the first wave of seven-day GP access pilots made less than convincing reading.

It found a 15% reduction in minor, self-presenting A&E attendances after more than a year of the pilots. The £3.2m estimated savings in the pilot areas were significant, but were dwarfed by the schemes' £50m initial funding.

The evaluation found that each appointment offered cost up to £50. It recommended that, given reported low utilisation on Sundays 'in most locations, additional hours are most likely to be taken up if provided during the week or



What is the evidence?

- The Challenge Fund pilots found practices worked more 'collectively' and 90% of patients said extended GP opening hours was either very or fairly convenient¹
- There was a 15% reduction in minor self-presenting A&E attendances in pilot areas, compared with a 7% reduction nationally. There was no discernible change in emergency admissions or use of out-of-hours services
- The average cost per appointment offered was typically in the range of £30 to £50

- Very low weekend utilisation figures (particularly on Sundays) contrasted with the 'success' of the weekday non-core slots
- The Department of Health said: 'By 2020 this approach will be rolled out across the country as part of our plan for a seven-day NHS'
- But the GPC said the official evaluation raised 'real questions' about the wisdom of persisting with the schemes
- Another recent study found only 0.4% of people would benefit from Sunday GP appointments, with the majority preferring Saturday access²

References

- 1 NHS England. Prime Minister's Challenge Fund: Improving Access to General Practice First Evaluation Report: October 2015. tinyurl.com/Pilot-evaluation
- 2 Simpson J et al. Access to general practice in England: time for a policy rethink. *Br J Gen Pract* 2015; 65:640-607

on Saturdays (particularly Saturday mornings)'.
 The Department of Health was quick to brand the first wave a 'success', but, as Pulse has reported before, the reality is that almost half of the pilots have already reduced their opening hours.

As central government funding runs out for the first wave, Pulse can now reveal that only two of the 19 areas providing seven-day access have fully committed to fund them beyond next March, while one has restricted access to patients with long-term conditions and another has had to apply for renewed government funding.

Two areas have told Pulse they intend to scale back their schemes. Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly has said it will not be funding the extended hours schemes beyond next April, other than a single site in Exeter that will provide a winter-only Saturday GP surgery service for 18 weeks from 7 November, 2016. NHS Hambleton, Richmondshire and Whitby CCG also said it had no current plans to reinstate weekend opening having dropped it earlier this year.

Even enthusiastic areas, such as Bury – which has been held up by the Department of Health as evidence of the scheme's success (see box) – are unclear about whether they will pursue the scheme. Despite a spokesperson saying the scheme has 'worked very well', discussions about its future are 'ongoing' (see box, page 8).

Uncertain future

In summary, four of the schemes will continue in some form, two have drastically cut funding and 13 are reviewing their options. Unless additional money is found to allow CCGs to continue to fund the schemes, the likelihood is many will fall foul of cuts as commissioners try to balance their books.

NHS Southwark CCG is one area going ahead full-steam with seven-day GP access – but it is not cheap. The CCG has committed £2m a year for the next three years for 80,000 additional routine appointments from 8am to 8pm, seven days a week, at two sites in the south London borough. NHS Slough CCG also told Pulse it is continuing to fund extra evening and weekend GP appointments, and commissioners in Barking, Havering and Dagenham, in east London, will continue to fund routine seven-day GP access, but it will be restricted to people with five or more long-term conditions. Bristol and South Gloucestershire will



What next for the seven-day GP access pilots?

1 Cumbria

Pilot GP clinics at a local hospital. Undergoing a patient consultation on extended GP access
Current status Under review

2 Darlington

Pilot Scheme across 10 practices offered 8am-6.30pm weekend opening, but has already dropped Sunday opening during the pilot stage
Current status CCG has not committed yet to long-term funding

3 Hambleton, Richmondshire, Whitby

Pilot £2.5m scheme across 22 practices offering 8am-8pm access every day, but stopped providing weekend access before the end of the pilot due to a lack of demand
Current status No current plans to reinstate weekend opening

4 Morecambe

Pilot £1m scheme across four practices offering 8am-8pm opening seven days a week
Current status Refused to state

5 West Wakefield

Pilot £1.4m scheme offering 8am-8pm access, seven days a week across six practices
Current status Undecided, subject to an ongoing evaluation

6 Bury

Pilot Says scheme offering 8am-8pm on weekdays and 8am-6pm at weekends across 30 practices 'has worked well'
Current status Discussions 'ongoing'

7 Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire

Pilot Testing extended hours and use of Skype consultations for a million patients, but cut weekend opening hours during pilot
Current status Under review. One area (NHS Rushcliffe CCG) has said it will wait until details of the new voluntary GP contract emerge before committing to funding

8 Warrington

Pilot £3m scheme over 29 practices offering 8am-8pm, seven days a week
Current status Undecided, subject to an ongoing evaluation

9 Birmingham

Pilot £1m in two practices offering 8am-8pm GP access seven days a week
Current status Pending evaluation

10 Herefordshire

Pilot 24 practices were opening until 8pm every day, but two sites have already dropped Sunday opening
Current status CCG to review longer-term sustainability

11 West Hertfordshire

Pilot 15 practices providing daily access until 8pm, but Sunday pm opening dropped
Current status CCG to review and make decision in January 2016

12 North-west London

Pilot £5m scheme to offer 8am-8pm access during the week and six hours at weekends
Current status Changed opening hours during pilot stage and only one area - Brent - has promised funding post April 2016

13 Barking, Havering, Dagenham and Redbridge

Pilot £5.6m scheme covering 137 practices offered access to practices until 10pm on weekdays and 8am-8pm at weekends
Current status Has launched scheme for weekend routine

GP appointments, restricted to people with five or more long-term conditions, and urgent appointments for other patients

14 Southwark

Pilot 45 practices offering 8am-8pm access, seven days a week
Current status The CCG has committed £2m per year for three years (around 80,000 additional appointments per year)

15 Slough

Pilot £3m scheme with 16 practices offering 8am-8pm access every day, but cut weekend opening hours during the pilot stage
Current status Existing scheme will continue to be fully funded by the CCG

16 Bristol and South Gloucestershire

Pilot £2.9m scheme in 24 practices, 8am-8pm access on Saturday and 11am-5pm on Sunday
Current status It has also received funding from the second wave of the Challenge Fund, so pilot will continue

17 South Kent Coast

Pilot 8am-8pm opening, seven days a week, covering 13 practices
Current status CCG in discussions about further funding

18 Brighton and Hove

Pilot £2m scheme over 18 practices, with 8am-8pm access every day
Current status Discussions ongoing

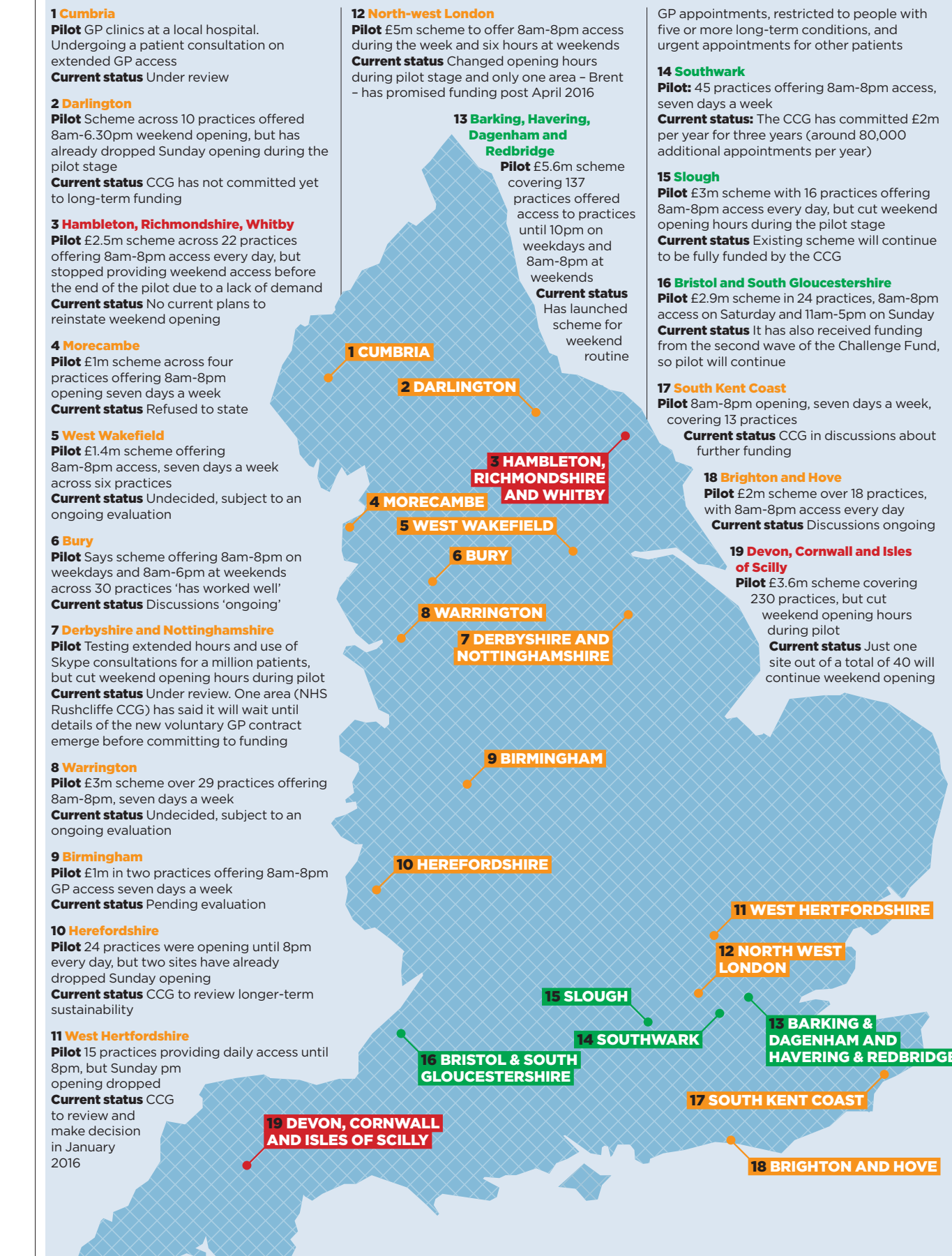
19 Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly

Pilot £3.6m scheme covering 230 practices, but cut weekend opening hours during pilot
Current status Just one site out of a total of 40 will continue weekend opening

Key

Continuing
Under review
Drastically reduced
/cancelled

Source: Pulse enquiries to all first-wave pilot schemes funded under the Prime Minister's Challenge Fund from April 2014



This job is making me ill - a poem
pulsetoday.co.uk/anon-poem



'Seven-day opening can work, but our discussions are ongoing'

Evidence tells us that improved access to primary care can change patient behaviour and reduce walk-in centre, out of hours and A&E attendance.¹ So in Bury, we decided to act.

Based on the successes of a pilot project, which reduced A&E attendances by 25%, GPs in Bury (under the banner of Bury GP Federation) applied for funding from the Prime Minister's Challenge Fund to increase our extended access. Our Radcliffe centre was already successfully providing GP services from 6.30pm to 8pm weekdays and 8am to 6pm at weekends for patients registered at six local practices. Using the learning from the pilot, we expanded this 'hub and spoke' model and added four more 'hubs' across the borough.

Key to the success of our extended hours project has been the ability to make all patient records accessible from each of the five hubs, something we know other areas have struggled with. We've been fortunate that all Bury practices are on the same clinical system, but this alone would not have been sufficient; positive collaboration made possible by working together in a federated model has been crucial.

We have been able to offer extended access to all 195,000 patients registered at all 33 GP practices in Bury. As well as the additional 1,400 GP appointments we are offering each week, every one of our practices has signed up to offer phone consultations as a routine alternative to face-to-face appointments.

We haven't experienced the lack of demand that some other pilot sites found. Sunday demand (although lower than for weekday evenings and Saturdays) has been steady and we have simply adjusted resourcing levels to match demand. Sunday appointments can alleviate pressures on practices that arise from Monday morning demand.

Other criticisms centre on the resourcing of extended access, but I believe, that if every GP in our borough volunteered to do one extended access shift a month, we could sustainably resource our extended access service.

Seven-day opening has worked very well for us in Bury. That said, discussions with commissioners are ongoing regarding the future model of extended access.



If all our GPs did one shift a month, we could resource the service

Dr Peter Thomas is organisational medical director for Bury GP Federation and a GP in the town

Reference

1 RCGP. *The Future of GP Out-of-Hours Care*. 2014. tinyurl.com/RCGP-future

continue its scheme after receiving new funding from the second wave of the Challenge Fund.

Expensive luxury

GP leaders say the overall picture shows that seven-day GP access – even if managed through hubs, rather than requiring all practices to open every day – is an expensive luxury the NHS cannot afford at the moment.

GPC deputy chair Dr Richard Vautrey said: 'At £43 a consultation, no reduction in hospital admissions and only minimal changes in A&E minor injury attendances, there must be real questions about the wisdom of continuing these schemes.'

The RCGP has written to the House of Commons Health Committee's ongoing primary care inquiry saying it 'rejects' the seven-day GP access policy because it is 'unrealistic due to the huge pressure general practice is under, with existing services in urgent need of resources'.

And Pulse has learned the pilots are causing real concern among out-of-hours providers. Chair of the Northern Doctors Urgent Care group John Harrison says the pilots are offering GPs up to double the out-of-hours rate – £100 an hour plus – meaning the group cannot compete.

He says: 'We lost a quarter of our workforce within a couple of weeks. Not a lot of GPs want to do out of hours, so a scheme like this causes absolute mayhem.'

But the DH is under strict orders from Number 10 to make the scheme work. The first pledge in the Conservatives' 2015 election manifesto said the party would 'provide seven-day a week access to your GP and deliver a truly seven-day NHS'.

Although the scheme appears to be floundering, the Government is likely to find the resources to make it happen.

In July, Pulse learned the DH had raided £25m from the Primary Care Transformation Fund – previously the infrastructure fund designed to improve GP premises – to help fund the second wave of pilots, which launched this year.

Other areas are using NHS England's 'Vanguard' pilot funding to carry forward seven-day access schemes. For example, the West Wakefield GP federation, a first-wave Challenge Fund pilot, is now trialling the 'multispecialty community care' model under NHS England guidance, which the federation said 'encompasses evening and weekend services'.

The Treasury's spending review (due to be announced as Pulse went to press) could well assign some of the £8bn increase in NHS funding to extending seven-day working across the service.

The GPC may have ruled out agreeing to seven-day access requirements in the GP contract for next year, but negotiations are ongoing and it would be no surprise if the health secretary attempted to strongarm extended access in as a contractual requirement.

The wheels may be coming off, but don't underestimate the PM's determination to maintain momentum. GPs are in for a rocky ride.