

55 UNFAIR DELIVERY CHARGES - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

Having made the major error of actually taking the Easter Bank Holiday I wandered into CAB this morning (Tuesday) and, after diligent searching, located my desk underneath what appeared to be the product of a small rainforest. Having started up my PC I found that some 40 plus people were all anxious to talk to me urgently and, when I unlocked the front door at opening time, the waiting room swiftly overflowed. I am therefore writing this piece at home at night, disturbed only by two cats who enjoy jumping on the keyboard. (If you find any spelling errors then they are at fault, not me). My study, which is usually a haven of quietly humming computers and scanners, seems to have been turned into an extension greenhouse and I note that there are several boxes of seed potatoes, onion sets and tomato plants littered about and I strongly suspect that Liz may have some knowledge of this.

I recently bought some new IT equipment for said office and – happily – was able to source it locally. A couple of years ago Liz decided it was time to buy a new suite for the house and many hours were spent going through brochures. Eventually I was advised that we wanted a particular design made by a well known maker from down the line and I got as far as placing the order only to be told that “as we were in a KW Postcode (and therefore on an island) the delivery charge would be – as I recall – an extra £200 on top of the standard £150”. I explained that actually, whilst the inhabitants of Caithness are regularly marginalised by all and sundry, the last time I checked there was still, surprisingly, a terrestrial connection to the rest of mainland Scotland. Thus, we were not an island. I was then asked if we were close to Glasgow. No. The salesperson seemed a little perplexed by this and said she would call me back. When she did so she confirmed that delivery would indeed cost this outrageous sum and the goods would be conveyed by a firm specialising in deliveries to the outer islands of the west coast. Famed as I am for my patience when dealing with annoying people, I cancelled the order there and then and managed to buy an excellent product from a store in Wick (delivered from Italy) with no excess charges at all and positioned and prepared by friendly local people.

I have no doubt that many readers will have had similar experiences and CCAB, working with Citizens Advice Scotland, have been campaigning long and loud for some action to be taken. There is no doubt that grossly excessive charges have an effect not only on individuals, but on business and commerce generally, and it is time that this was dealt with. There is – at last – some movement and CAS issued a press release on 31st January 2018 which states:

“Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) has welcomed news that the House of Commons Scottish Affairs committee is to investigate the issue of unfair delivery fees to northern parts of Scotland. Nina Ballantyne, from the CAS

Consumer Futures Unit, says, “We welcome this inquiry and have already agreed to provide our own evidence, gathered over the last six years, to assist the committee in its work. CAS is keen to focus on constructive efforts that will bring solutions to the 1 million Scots who are hit by unfair delivery charges.”

Last month CAS published new research which found:

- consumers in northern parts of Scotland are asked to pay at least 30% more, on average, for delivery than consumers elsewhere in Great Britain.
- This rises to 50% on average in the Scottish islands (and because we live in a KW Postcode and the knowledge of Scottish Geography tends to be a bit lacking in many cases we are often “islanders”)
- For heavier items, people in the Highlands and Islands can be asked to pay almost four times as much as the rest of Great Britain.
- Over 80% of consumers affected do not think the extra price is fair, with 83% saying they’d buy more online if it weren’t for the charges.

Our Consumer Futures Unit has done a lot of research and have said that “The issue affects anyone ordering goods to be delivered north of the central belt, including those in Perthshire, Aberdeenshire, Morayshire, Argyll and Bute, the North-West Highlands, and the Scottish Islands. We have referred to this area as “Highlands and Islands” for concision, although it includes some areas that may be considered outwith that region. Our primary recommendation following this research is that parcel companies should consider collaborating with each other and with the public sector to reduce their operating costs in the Highlands and Islands, driving down the prices charged to all consumers. We have begun to secure commitment from key industry and public sector representatives to work together on this, and hope to hold discussions in early 2018 to agree which solutions could be worth trialling.”

Now, this is all excellent but I can see problems because cooperation is fine in theory, but getting it to work in practice when profit (or a drop in profit) is involved is another matter altogether. It is going to be very interesting to see what the House of Commons comes up with, but anything short of legislation is likely not to be a total success.

So what can we do about it locally? The first step is always going to be to check the website or to ask the tele-sales person about delivery costs in advance. Do they charge extra and if so how much and why? How will the goods be sent? (It is not unknown to find that one or two chancers will even try to charge extra for standard mail postage). What do they mean by “Mainland Scotland”? Check that they are aware that Caithness is on the mainland and do not hesitate to correct them if they have it wrong. Secondly it is time to complain to our MP and MSP – it takes five minutes to pop an email or a quick letter to them. We need to raise awareness and make as much noise as possible to get things moving. And finally, remember that money talks – simply refuse to order from any firms who try and rip you off and buy elsewhere. Clearly, it is always a matter of choice who you buy goods and

services from but, if at all possible, I personally prefer to use a local business – there is very little you cannot source in the County and, if things go wrong, then it is much easier to get them put right when you know the seller and they know you.

So there we have it – another CAB/ CAS campaign and I hope we win. And now, having replaced a tray of onions on my desk and cleaned paw prints off my keyboard, I propose to advise both cats that it is bedtime – they are too lazy to actually walk so I shall finish my day by carrying them to their beds after their usual snack has been served.