

Amazon ‘treating the elderly as neighbourhood delivery depots’

By Katie Morley and Sam Meadows

DELIVERY drivers have been told to stop taking advantage of elderly people’s kindness, as it has emerged that their homes are being used as parcel depots.

Dame Esther Rantzen, founder of the Silver Line, which helps the elderly, last night called for retailers and delivery firms to devise a code of conduct to prevent vulnerable residents from being exploited.



Betty Wright, 94, was taking in up to 30 parcels a year

She told The Daily Telegraph: “It would be right to create a code of conduct that ensured that if elderly people do not want to take in parcels for their neighbours, they do not have to feel obliged to do so.”

She also said residents should be given signs for their front doors, saying “I am afraid I am unable to take in parcels for my neighbours”, so delivery men know to stay away.

The strain placed on delivery drivers, who must meet retailers’ targets of delivering up to 200 parcels a day, meaning they often have no time even for lavatory breaks, has been widely reported on. It appears that conditions may have become so bad that parcel men are relying on elderly volunteers.

Betty Wright, 94, is one of a growing number of pensioners who are asked to take in parcels. Her son, Bill, says Amazon has effectively been using her home as a local delivery hub for more than two years, leaving around 30 parcels a year there for local residents who are out.

On taking delivery of one particularly large item, the weight caused Ms Wright to fall to the floor. She escaped with bruises, but she was shaken. Her son lodged multiple complaints with Amazon, and asked it to stop, but the deliveries kept coming, he said. Last month, the situation became so bad that her son resorted to calling the police and contacting this newspaper's Consumer Champion column for help.

Ms Wright's case has also helped to prompt Dame Esther to call for change. She said Amazon had "asked too much" of the 94-year-old.

Following The Daily Telegraph's involvement, Amazon has taken steps to ensure Ms Wright will not be asked to take in any more parcels. She has also received an apology, flowers and a gift hamper. Amazon urged people who do not wish to take parcel deliveries to contact its helpline.

Complaints about online retailers and delivery firms typically double during the Christmas months, according to figures from complaints service Resolver. In each of the past four years, the service received twice as many complaints in Dec and Jan as the average amount across the rest of the year, it said. In Dec 2018 and Jan 2019, the service received an average 10,340 complaints, while the monthly average for Feb to Nov was 4,514. The service has received more than 5,000 complaints in the first few days of Dec.

Citizens Advice said the majority of the complaints it receives relate to lost or damaged parcels, but that a major problem for consumers was tracking down the person who is responsible for addressing such issues.

Although consumer law stipulates that the retailer is responsible, the charity said consumers often find that retailers tell them to take up the issue with the delivery firm. Gillian Guy, chief executive of Citizens Advice, said: "Our reliance on the parcel market is increasing as more people shop online. We're asking the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate the parcel market to make sure it works for consumers, not just retailers."

Have van, will deliver

Few barriers to becoming a courier

The parcel delivery industry is largely unregulated, according to Citizens Advice, which wants the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate.

Firms are bound by the usual constraints of consumer law, but there are few barriers to establishing a service. Ofcom regulates some postal services but cannot investigate individual complaints. The National Courier and Despatch Association, a trade body, lists almost 70 members – not including major players such as Yodel.

According to Startups.co.uk, it is easy to establish a courier service with little more than a bike or van. It even suggests investing in a “challenger drone” service. Amazon, meanwhile, has a network of delivery drivers through its “Flex” scheme, stating that “all you need is a vehicle, a [smart] phone, and some free time”.