

10 Years ago Newcastle Emlyn had branches of HSBC, Lloyds, NatWest and Barclays. Today these same banks have closed their doors telling us to use the Post office. The only Lloyds branch that has remained open is a 40 minute drive away in Carmarthen. Even more galling are the adverts by NatWest advertising their mobile banking facilities, only necessary because they have closed all the branches and undoubtedly made staff redundant in the process.

What they don't tell you is that it takes 1 week for cheques paid through the Post office to be cleared funds. This has had an impact on the farm account and direct debits have been returned by the bank because of "uncleared funds". When we have queried a refund of charges as the uncleared funds related to cheques from the local auctioneers for livestock sales this was pooh-poohed. We have gone backwards needing a week to clear cheques, it used to be 3 working days in the branch banking network. The local business account manager would not have returned these items unpaid because they knew us, the account and the local business networks. Life is tough enough for small family farms struggling to survive in the current economic climate.

However it is not just the counter service that is causing huge problems. Our Farm Account Business Manager is in Glasgow and you ring up and it is pot luck who you get to speak to. There is no continuity or personal service. Decision-making is escalated up a decision tree and a simple request can take days to be approved. Template letters are churned out and leaflets sent out at huge cost and little purpose. You ring them up and spend 20 minutes in a queue to be told incessantly that they are experiencing a spike in demand and either hold or call back later or use the website. This is code for we have not got enough staff to cope with the telephone demand now that we have closed down most of our branches.

What does a manager in Glasgow know about farming in rural West Wales? Not only that but can they meet Welsh language demands? I am more fortunate as my NatWest business account manager is at least only in Sheffield.

The banks are all marketing online and digital banking. This shift to digital and on-line banking is age discriminatory. The age profile for Agriculture is 50+ but apparently we all wanted to move to online banking and the branches have closed at customer request. The latest gimmick is if you have a banking app on your mobile phone and take a picture of a cheque and send it to the bank it will be cleared in 2 working days.

10 years ago I had a business account Manager in Carmarthen and the choice of local branches of all the main high street banks to choose to use. This is customer dis-service of a high order.

We are reliant on the local Spar to provide a free cash machine service in the town. There are frequent queues obstructing the pavements and why should a local convenience store plug this gap?

Newcastle Emlyn is a bustling market town with a blend of independent and chain stores. We are not a cashless society.

If I ran my training and HR business like this I would very soon go out of business.

This whole situation is an utter disgrace and shows the utter contempt the banking sector has for its customers and society in general. They might have been too big to fail but they think nothing of their impact on small businesses. Ignore your customers at your peril, customer loyalty can be very fickle. Unfortunately it is almost as if there has been collusion amongst the banks with them all closing their doors in towns in quick succession. We should have pre-empted the decision when they all started to reduce their opening hours from Monday-Saturday to 3 days per week – the thin end of the wedge. Surely if one of them had kept its doors open they would have gained more business and accounts.