The Sun on the "ICSS" rip-off (14 May 2017)

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PHONE NUMBERS ON GOOGLE ARE FLEECING CUSTOMERS

SCAM directory websites are fleecing Brits who hunt for numbers on Google – by telling them to ring higher rate lines that can cost up to £10 for a 15-minute call.

The pricey numbers appear high up in search results for hundreds of government services and businesses including the Inland Revenue, National Rail Enquiries, the Passport Office and Marks & Spencer.

The unofficial numbers put callers through to the business or agency by a so-called "call connection service". This costs up to 68p a minute from a mobile and up to 25p from a landline – with the site owners taking a cut.

The Sun's investigation into rip-off numbers comes in the same week we exposed how calls to 118 118 cost a minimum of £8.98.

Charges spiral further if users get put through to their number, with a half-hour call costing about £140.

But Brits who want to bypass 118 may still be paying over the odds if they try to find a number online.

The Sun has found numerous websites provide higher rate charges to numbers that should be free from a landline or standard rate.

For example, if you search for Marks and Spencer's head office number on Google, a website that appears in the results is complaintsnumbers.co.uk – which tells you to ring an 0844 number.

This costs 7p per minute plus an access charge of up to 55p per minute, depending on which telephone provider you use. At that rate, calls to this number would cost £9.30 for a 15-minute conversation.

Nothing but scams

But the real M&S number is an 0207 London one – free to call on most mobile and landline packages.

When The Sun tried to ring the Bradford-based head office of complaintsnumbers.co.uk, the number wasn't working.

And if you search Google for the HMRC number, contactnumbers.guru provides an 0870 one – which charges 13p a minute plus your phone provider's access charge.

But calls to the real HMRC number – which starts 0300 – are included in your phone tariff.

Pressure group the Fair Telecoms Campaign is demanding a ban on the promotion of fake numbers, and for re-routing services to be axed.

The re-routers were the subject of a Government crackdown in 2014.

Official rules say sites advertising unofficial numbers starting 087 and 09 must make clear the fact they are handling the call and declare the cost. Numbers starting with 084 are not covered by the rules.

But when the numbers appear on search engine results, people typically can't see the call charges unless they actually click through to the webpage.

And they often have no idea they could call a freephone or standard-rate number instead.

David Hickson of the Fair Telecoms Campaign said: "These so-called services are nothing but scams.

"They are exploiting loopholes that were left when regulations were recently tightened. Both Ofcom and the Phone-paid Services Authority must now act to close them.

"Each of these scam sites has got a number for most organisations you can think of.

"They can stack a virtually unlimited number of calls, so they're making money while people are queuing and talking.

"It's like setting up a fake front entrance to a shop you don't own then charging people to use your door."