



A tale of two cities

Consumer Choice compares the cost of some everyday services used by Dublin and Belfast consumers. The results make for interesting reading.

It has been well established that retail goods such as groceries are cheaper in Northern Ireland than they are in the Republic. Our own research last year confirmed this point when we found that, excluding VAT rates, retail goods were over 20% cheaper in Northern stores than they are in their Southern equivalents. And one only has to look at the southern registered cars that fill the car parks of Northern Ireland's shopping centres to see that consumers from this side of the border have been taking advantage of the lower prices. But what about prices charged in the non-retail sector – are these lower too? We decided

to find out by comparing costs of some everyday services in the two capital cities.

Plumbers

Consumer Choice called a random sample of plumbers to obtain quotes for getting the annual service on a standard gas boiler in current working order. When we called five plumbers who operate in the Dublin area, we were quoted anything from between €90 and €110 inc. VAT at 13.5%. When we called Belfast providers with the same request, the average cost was €63 after the sterling price was converted back into euros. This included the current UK VAT rate of 15%. Overall,

quotes for Dublin contractors were over 33% more expensive on average. When VAT rates are stripped out, the difference is almost 35%.

Dentists

For dentists, we again called a random sample and asked how much a routine dental examination and polish would cost. Dublin based dentists quoted us between €70 and €140. Dentists based in the Belfast area quoted between €53 and €91. These are final prices as dental costs are VAT exempt in the UK & Ireland. Overall, based on our survey, Dublin consumers are charged an extra €28, or

AT A GLANCE

Dublin-Belfast price survey.

29% more than those getting the same procedure in Belfast.

The difference in price is probably not too surprising as there has been much anecdotal evidence of Southern consumers travelling to Northern Ireland for dental implants, crowns, root canals and veneers. And under the Treatment Benefit Scheme, consumers who have the necessary PRSI contributions can reclaim some of the cost of certain dental treatments – including treatment carried out in another EU state (see *Useful contacts* for more details).

Mechanics

When comparing mechanics, *Consumer Choice* contacted a random sample of garages and requested quotations for the cost of a car service. We asked for the price of a standard service on a 2001 1.6 litre Ford Focus with 80,000 miles on the clock. On average, we found that it cost over €100 more to have the car serviced in Dublin than it would in Belfast. This represents a difference of over 45%. When the relevant VAT rates are stripped out of the quotations, Dublin consumers are actually paying 47% more according to the prices we were quoted.

Driving instructors

When comparing the cost of driving instruction, we compared the cost of a 1-hour lesson for both Dublin and Belfast providers. In our survey, we found that on average it costs €10 or 25% more for an hour's driving instruction in Dublin than in Belfast. When VAT rates are stripped out, the differential rises to 27%. However, Dublin consumers can take comfort from the fact that despite the price having almost doubled in the recent budget, the cost of taking the driving test itself is cheaper south of the border. In Dublin, a standard driving test costs €75. In Belfast, it costs almost 30% more at €105.

Chiropractors

Consumer Choice also surveyed chiropractors for the cost of an initial consultation. Chiropractors operating out of Dublin gave us an average quote of €66. However, after converting currencies, the average cost of a consultation for a Belfast based chiropractor was €16 cheaper, at €50. This equates to almost 25% less overall. The provision of chiropractic treatment by a registered chiropractor is exempt from VAT in both Dublin and Belfast.

PLUMBING & HEATING – THE COST OF HAVING A GAS BOILER SERVICED

Dublin	Price €	Belfast	Price € ¹
5 Star Plumbing & Heating, Swords	90	Central Group Services, Tamar St.	74
John Martin Heating, Celbridge	90	Andrews Plumbing & Heating, Ballysillan	60
John Davitt Plumbing, Finglas	80	John Nelson, Cavehill Road	57
TM Plumbing, Kells	110	James Davey Plumbing & Heating, Gotfin St.	62
Kelco Services, Leopardstown	105	Beulah Plumbing & Heating, Abbeyvale Gardens	62
Average	95	Average	63

Note: ¹ Sterling price converted to euro using the exchange rate on the day the quote was obtained. Prices obtained May 13-20 2009.

DENTISTS – THE COST OF A DENTAL EXAM AND TOOTH POLISH

Dublin	Price €	Belfast	Price € ¹
Beechwood Dental Dublin, Ranelagh	140	A H Nicholl, Shore Road	62
Paul Owens Dental, Baggot St	100	Bradbury Dental Clinic, Bradbury Place	79
Pembroke Dental Clinic, Ballsbridge	70	E M O'Donnell, Finaghy Road	91
North Strand Dental Surgery, Nth Strand Rd	80	Grosvenor Road Dental, Grosvenor Road	53
Boosterstown Dental Practice, Dublin	90	P.G. Beirne, Antrim Road	57
Average	96	Average	68

Note: ¹ Sterling price converted to euro using the exchange rate on the day the quote was obtained. Prices obtained May 13-20 2009.

MECHANICS – THE COST OF GETTING YOUR CAR SERVICED

Dublin	Price €	Belfast	Price € ¹
Tim Murphy Auto, Dublin 6	210	Annadale Car Clinic, Barnetts Road	116
Kevin Byrne, Sundrive Road, Co. Dublin	135	B T Motors, Tidarg St	108
Drew Motor Services, Pembroke Lane, D4	260	D S Motors, Parkgate Avenue	147
C&F Motors, Mt Merrion, Co Dublin	270 ²	Mill Autos, Ligoniel road	96
Ailesbury Auto, Beach Road, D4	210 ³	Universal Autos, Springfield Road	113
Average	217	Average	116

Note: ¹ Sterling price converted to euro using the exchange rate on the day the quote was obtained. ² Quote given was for between €260 and €280 so the average was used. ³ Quote given was for between €200 and €220 so the average was used. Prices obtained May 13-20 2009.

DRIVING INSTRUCTION – THE COST OF A 1-HOUR DRIVING LESSON

Dublin	Price €	Belfast	Price € ¹
Mini Motoring School	35	Abba Driving School	28
Pinnacle Driving School	35	Acclaim Driving School	34
Accelerate Driving School	45	DKL Driving School	27
ABS School of Motoring	40	The Car College	28
Crown Motoring School	40	Belfast School of Motoring	28
Average	39	Average	29

Note: ¹ Sterling price converted to euro using the exchange rate on the day the quote was obtained. Prices obtained May 13-20 2009.

CHIROPRACTORS – THE COST OF AN INITIAL CONSULTATION

Dublin	Price €	Belfast	Price € ¹
Andrew Doody, Stillorgan Chiropractic Clinic	70	The Ulster Spine Centre, Upper Knockbreda Rd	74
Fitzwilliam Health Clinic, Fitzwilliam Sq	60	Belfast Physio & Sports Injuries, Saintfield Rd	40
Beyond Chiropractic, Dun Laoghaire	60	The Belfast Chiropractic Clinic, Ormeau Rd	49
Chiropractic First, Terenure	70	Avalon Chiropractic Clinic, Ravenhill Ave	51
Back to Basics, Dun Laoghaire	70	Finaghy Chiropractic Clinic, Upper Lisburn Rd	34
Average	66	Average	50

Note: ¹ Sterling price converted to euro using the exchange rate on the day the quote was obtained. Prices obtained May 13-20 2009.

choice comment

Our survey is not exhaustive, and only represents a small sample, but it does seem that Dublin consumers pay significantly more for professional services than those in Belfast. Taken overall, the Dublin quotations we were given were about 30% higher than those for Belfast, so it is not just groceries that are cheaper north of the border. Of course, behind every North-South price survey there are many variables which cannot be accounted for. These include tax rates, rents and levels of income. But can these really account for such large price differentials? Well, in relation to the difference in the price of retail goods it seems that question is slowly but surely being answered. It was recently revealed by *The Irish Times* that Tesco's profit margins are over 50% higher in the Republic than they are elsewhere. Could the same be true for services as well?

Useful contacts

Treatment Benefit Scheme
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