

The complaint

Miss P is unhappy with how Bank of Scotland plc trading as Halifax dealt with her request to withdraw cash from her account.

What happened

Miss P wanted to withdraw a large amount of cash from her account. She called Halifax to ask how she could withdraw over £5,000 and was told she could do this by going to a branch. She attended a branch and asked to withdraw significantly over £5,000. The branch told her that an amount like this would need to have been ordered in, but said it had a portion of the money available and Miss P could go to another branch for the rest.

Halifax Branch visit

Before agreeing to the request though, Halifax asked Miss P why she wanted to withdraw the cash. Miss P spent some time in the branch discussing this and eventually Halifax refused to give her access to the money as she wanted. Halifax also held onto her debit card for a period of time. Miss P then made a visit to another branch where a manager spoke to her about her request. That branch allowed her to withdraw the money as she wanted, although Miss P was unhappy that she wasn't allowed to count the cash or given the option of a private room to do this.

Miss P complained to Halifax – and it acknowledged that its service in the initial phone call could have been better. It said that it should have told Miss P that she needed to order the amount she wanted to withdraw as cash and paid her £30 for this. But it didn't think it had acted wrongly in any other way.

Complaint made to Halifax

Miss P was unhappy with this and brought her complaint to this service where one of our investigators reviewed what had happened. They said that Halifax was entitled to have asked more questions of Miss P before giving her the cash as she wanted. Our investigator felt that this was, ultimately, in Miss P's best interests. While the first branch didn't give her the cash and the second did – they felt that this was in line with Halifax's processes, where different branches are entitled to decide independently on what checks they do in situations like this. While Halifax may not have offered Miss P a private room, they felt this was reasonable in the circumstances.

Miss P didn't agree and so the case has been passed to me to decide.

What I've decided – and why

I've considered all the available evidence and arguments to decide what's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this complaint.

The starting point here is that a bank should generally follow a customer's instructions unless there's good reason not to do so. Miss P wanted to withdraw a significant amount of cash at once. There are risks to giving a customer this amount of money in cash and so I think it's fair and reasonable that Halifax wanted to ask some further questions about why Miss P wanted to withdraw this amount of money as cash. I think it's a matter of good practice that a bank would take steps to make sure that a customer isn't being tricked or coerced into making a cash withdrawal.

So I think it's fair that Halifax didn't immediately give Miss P access to the cash in the way she wanted. I realise that she thinks that Halifax has no right to stop her getting access to her money – but I have to consider things from both sides. It's not that Halifax was saying that Miss P was never entitled to the money it holds in her name – it's just that it wanted to perform more checks before it gave her such a large amount in a particular way. Such checks are, I think, in Miss P's best interests – as they are intended to be a safeguard against customers falling victim to scams and fraud. I realise Miss P will see things very differently though.

First Halifax branch

The first branch didn't feel it would be appropriate to give Miss P the amount she wanted in cash based on what she told it. I think that's a decision it was entitled to make based on what I've seen here. Halifax had some concerns based on what she told it and acted on those concerns.

I realise that Miss P is unhappy that the conversation around her request took place in the main area of the branch, rather than in a private room. It's for Halifax to decide whether that's an appropriate step to take if a customer hasn't specifically requested this. Here, it looks like Halifax decided to provide its service and respond to Miss P's request in the main area of the branch – which is something it was entitled to do. I don't think providing a private room here would have affected the outcome of her visit, which is that the branch didn't give Miss P the cash in the way she wanted.

It also looks like the branch held onto her debit card for a period of time, before giving it back to her before she left. That's a step that I imagine Halifax took while it was making more enquiries, which I think is fair. It gave the card back before Miss P left the branch in any event.

Second Halifax branch

When Miss P went to the second Halifax branch, it too asked questions before allowing Miss P access to the cash as she wanted. I think that shows a certain consistency in Halifax's approach to her request. This time though, the branch was satisfied by what Miss P said about her reasons for withdrawing the cash. That too is a decision it was entitled to make and having looked at the evidence here, I think it's a decision it made fairly – and it was ultimately what Miss P wanted.

Counting the cash

I realise that Miss P would have liked Halifax to have spoken to her and counted the cash in a private room. But Halifax has explained that it's not its process to offer that in circumstances like this. Having considered this and the overall circumstances, it's not clear that Halifax's decision to deal with the transaction in this way had any negative impact on the situation here. Ultimately, Miss P was allowed to withdraw money in the way she wanted. She also said that she's unhappy that she wasn't allowed to count the cash herself before leaving. I can see why that would be, but there is no suggestion that Miss P was given anything other than the amount of cash she wanted here.

It would have been helpful if Halifax gave Miss P the correct advice when she first called it. For that it's paid £30, which I think is fair. But I haven't found that Halifax has acted unfairly in any other aspect of how it's dealt with this situation. That means I won't be telling it to do any more here.

My final decision

I don't uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Miss P to accept or reject my decision before 11 October 2023.

James Staples
Ombudsman