

The complaint

Ms I makes a number of complaints about National Westminster Bank Plc (NatWest).

What happened

Ms I says NatWest blocked her account without reason which required her to make wasted trips to a branch. She says she can't access her account online and is prevented from accessing her money. Ms I also says NatWest staff laughed at her during a telephone call and says there have been unauthorised payments to an astrologer. She would like appropriate compensation and account access. Ms I says a direct debit payment has also been refused which meant her telephone line was cut off.

NatWest says Ms I failed its security questions and so it correctly blocked her account. It says it requires her to attend a branch with identity documents and has no record of her being laughed at. NatWest says it likely Ms I signed up to pay the astrologer and says it didn't cancel her direct debit or disconnect telephone calls. It has paid Ms I £120 for inconvenience caused.

Ms I had brought her complaint to us, and our investigator didn't uphold it. The investigator thought NatWest was entitled to block the account and there was no evidence it had stopped the direct debit. The investigator didn't see any telephone evidence of Ms I being laughed at.

Ms I doesn't accept that view.

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.

Having done so I have come to the overall decision that I don't uphold this complaint. I appreciate Ms I will be disappointed by my decision and appreciate how strongly she feels about this complaint. I hope that now Ms I knows she must attend a NatWest branch with identification to remove the account block, she will do so and discuss with it how to avoid similar problems.

I am sure Ms I appreciates that fraud is a major problem for banks and building societies and that they must have appropriate security measures in place to protect its and its customer's money. I accept that on occasions such measures may cause legitimate transactions and accounts to be blocked but that doesn't mean a mistake has been made or that a business's actions were unfair. I also think it likely such security measures were made clear in the account terms and conditions.

I have looked carefully at NatWest's records and can see there have been occasions when NatWest has applied its security measures to Ms I's account and to certain transactions she tried to make. I can see that on occasions Ms I has failed security questions and so I don't think NatWest made a mistake or acted unfairly by applying account restrictions in those

circumstances. I think such measures were made to protect Ms I's money. I'm satisfied that NatWest has explained that Ms I needs to attend its branch with identification documents and has fairly explained how the account blocks can be removed. I accept Ms I was caused and will be caused inconvenience in attending a branch, but I can't see any alternative if security questions are failed.

I have not seen any evidence on NatWest's records that its staff laughed at Ms I and so I can't fairly conclude that took place. In any event I don't think that is Ms I's main area of complaint which is the account restrictions and which I have dealt with.

I also can't see any evidence that NatWest cancelled Ms I's direct debit. I would have expected to have seen a record of such a cancellation if NatWest did so. And think it possible that it was a problem with the telephone provider as Ms I's account on the face of it had sufficient money to pay for the direct debit. That is something Ms I will need to take up with that business.

Overall, I appreciate Ms I will be frustrated that she can't access what I accept is her money. But I'm satisfied that NatWest was reasonably entitled to restrict the account in these circumstances and hope that both parties will discuss how to avoid similar problems in the future. It follows that I can't fairly direct NatWest pay compensation but can see it's paid Ms I a goodwill gesture in respect of the inconvenience.

I make clear that I have not seen any evidence of a mistake by NatWest for the payment to the astrologer, which I think it likely Ms I initially agreed to pay. I can see it appears those payments have now been stopped.

My final decision

My final decision is that I don't uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Ms I to accept or reject my decision before 4 May 2024.

David Singh
Ombudsman