

The complaint

The estate of Mr W (the estate) complains that National Savings and Investments provided poor customer service.

What happened

Mr W died on 31 January 2023, which his wife informed NS&I of his passing. The estate sent NS&I the Grant of Probate, which they received on 22 June 2023. The estate say that they have requested more than once to have a full list of Mr W's accounts on the date of death, but the estate haven't been given this. The estate says NS&I repaid some certificates, but it was difficult to track these, as NS&I did not inform the estate that this was being done and there is no reference to NS&I credits in the nominated bank account. The estate feels the valuations they expected are several thousand pounds short of what Mr W had with his wife, and they couldn't check Mr W's holdings online. The estate made a complaint to NS&I.

NS&I partially upheld the estate's complaint and paid £50 compensation. They said the estate contacted their helpline on 3 March 2023 disputing the balance on the statement. NS&I said they have raised this with the bereavements team in order for a full trace to be completed and a statement to be reissued with the correct balance. NS&I said once a customer passes away there is a security marker placed on their account, which prevents any access into the account, including the online account. They apologised for a delay in processing the bereavement form.

NS&I sent a follow up letter and awarded another £50 compensation. They said on the letter the estate sent, there was a queried list of account numbers. NS&I say they sent the estate explaining each certificate on 1 September 2023. NS&I sent a list of account numbers to the estate with what has happened to the account (eg rolled over to a new account/transferred to Mr W's wife). The estate brought their complaint to our service.

Our investigator did not uphold the estate's complaint. She said the complaint to NS&I does consist of service issues when the estate contacted them about Mr W's passing and the service received. But as this complaint is being made on behalf of the late Mr W, she could only consider the loss to the estate itself, not any distress or inconvenience to the beneficiary or executor of the estate. She said NS&I acted fairly to try and resolve matters.

The estate asked for an ombudsman to review the complaint. In summary, the estate said they had no means of checking if NS&I have acted correctly, as NS&I would not allow them to access Mr W's account from the date of his death despite his accounts being managed online. The estate said that NS&I sent a general list, but they had no means to check this with what was in Mr W's account at the date of death and the amount had fallen short of what the estate expected to receive.

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.

Firstly, I want to pass my condolences to the estate. The estate have made a number of points to this service, and I've considered and read everything they've said and sent us. But, in line with this service's role as a quick and informal body I'll be focusing on the crux of their complaint in deciding what's fair and reasonable here.

I must make the estate aware that I'm only able to look into the estate's complaint about the sole accounts held in Mr W's name. I'm aware there is a separate complaint with our service regarding the issues with the accounts NS&I say are in trust, therefore I'm unable to investigate the issues with the trust as part of this decision.

I can understand the difficulty that the estate has in trying to reconcile the accounts as they have highlighted the online access to Mr W's accounts stopped on the date of his death. While I can sympathise with the frustration the estate has with the online access being stopped, I'm unable to conclude that NS&I made an error here, as their process is to place a security marker when they are notified of a death which prevents any access to the account – including online access.

What I have managed to obtain from NS&I is a list of accounts in Mr W's name on 31 January 2023 – the date Mr W passed away. This also contains values from this date, and not current values. I will ask our investigator to forward this onto the estate. The list also contains accounts in trust on Mr W's date of death and their values at the date of Mr W's death.

Mr W had a total of ten holdings in his sole name at the date of his death. I've not seen any evidence there were sole accounts which Mr W had at the date of his death which are missing from this list.

I've cross referenced each of these accounts to what have happened with them. Five of the accounts have transferred over into Mr W's wife's name and kept the same account number, two of the accounts have matured and have a new account number (and have been transferred over to Mr W's wife), two accounts were cashed in and Mr W's wife was sent a letter about these accounts dated 13 July 2023 (our investigator can forward her this letter again if she would like a copy of this), and one account was paid out in January 2024. So I'm satisfied that all ten of the sole accounts which were in Mr W's name have been accounted for.

NS&I have let down the estate at times during what's happened here. They have not provided the exact information to the estate which they wanted, and there has been poor customer service which has been acknowledged by NS&I such as processing delays. NS&I has paid the estate £100 in total for the service issues.

As our investigator explained to the estate, as this complaint is being made on behalf of the late Mr W, our service can't consider compensation for distress or inconvenience to the beneficiary or executor of the estate. So even though what transpired may have caused trouble and upset, I won't be asking NS&I to pay additional compensation. So it follows I won't be asking NS&I to do anything further here, but I will ensure our investigator sends the estate the list of the accounts as of 31 January 2023.

My final decision

I do not uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask the estate of Mr W to accept or reject my decision before 24 April 2024.

Gregory Sloanes
Ombudsman