

Final decision	
Complainant:	Mr N
Firm:	Firm RST
Complaint Reference:	RV/28
Date:	21 June 2007

1. The following represents my final decision in the complaint brought by Mr N against RST ("the firm"). I issued a provisional decision on the complaint on 1 February 2007, in which I indicated, with reasons, that I was minded to uphold the complaint. Mr N accepted my provisional findings. The firm did not, and made various submissions asking me to re-consider those findings.

2. In summary, the firm did not agree with my provisional finding that the firm possessed special knowledge and expertise and so should have recognised risk factors relating to investments in split capital investment trusts earlier than other financial firms. The firm also disagreed with my general approach to the assessment of professional liability and to my use of the FTSE350 High Yield Index as a benchmark for calculating redress. And the firm disagreed with my use of 8% per year simple interest on crystallised losses and to my 'whole portfolio' approach to redress for managed portfolios. I also received a number of submissions from other complainants about my provisional, general approach to complaints about splits.

Complaint

3. The complaint I am asked to resolve is between Mr N and RST. In January 1999 the firm advised Mr N to sell some of the holdings in his portfolio and use the proceeds to buy income-producing shares in three splits: ordinary shares in Aberdeen Preferred Income Trust and Geared Income Investment Trust, and income shares in St David's Investment Trust. Mr N took the advice and invested a total of £47,960. His aim was to boost the income from his investment portfolio.

4. Following a large fall in the value of the portfolio, Mr N complained that the firm's advice had not been suitable for him. The firm did not accept the complaint, and so it falls to me to resolve it.

5. As I have made clear, I have treated the complaint as being one that Mr N, as a result of the firm's advice, came to hold a portfolio of investments that was unsuitable for him when viewed overall.

Introductory remarks

6. In many ways the dispute between Mr N and the firm is a straightforward matter much like many other thousands of disputes this Service is asked to determine about the suitability of investment advice and/or the management of investment portfolios.

7. This final decision forms part of our handling of over 6,000 complaints relating to advice by this and other firms to invest in splits, or in collective investments themselves

invested in splits. Most of those complaints have now been resolved - in a few cases I or one of my ombudsman colleagues have issued a formal decision to determine the matter but in more cases my adjudicators have successfully mediated a settlement. Some cases that were initially referred to this Service have subsequently been resolved in other ways. Several customers accepted an offer from Fund Distribution Ltd (administering the fund to which many firms contributed following discussions with the regulator). And some firms against which complaints were made have foundered and have become unable to pay claims. Complaints against those firms have been passed to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, the statutory "fund of last resort".

8. Around 300 "splits" cases remain to be dealt with by this Service, the majority of which relate to this firm and eight other stockbroking firms all represented by a city law firm (Barlow Lyde and Gilbert). This means that significant elements of the evidence and arguments that the firm has raised in response to this complaint are common, not just to this case I am dealing with today, but to all the other splits cases that this Service is considering in relation to this firm. In all, the firm's legal and other advisers have sent us seven reports and two opinions of Counsel.

9. Whilst there may be common elements to the complaints and I naturally seek to decide similar cases in a similar way, it is my duty to consider disputes on the basis of what is fair and reasonable in the particular circumstances of the case. The widespread concerns surrounding the events in the splits sector, the significant numbers of splits complaints received, and the broadly similar issues underlying many of the cases¹ have all prompted me to consider the common elements, but I must still treat each complaint as requiring an individual decision. If, when considering each case on its own particular merits, I encounter so-called 'generic issues' affecting a particular firm – in other words, splits-related issues that bear upon this case as well as others involving the same firm - I must decide to what extent those issues should be relevant to my findings in the particular case. My aim is to be fair and consistent in dealing with the generic issues, whilst taking full account of the facts and issues which distinguish one case from another.

10. It is to be hoped that the approach I decide to take in resolving this complaint about the firm will be helpful in resolving other cases involving the firm, where there are sufficient similarities. The actual outcome of each case will, however, depend upon its facts.

11. As far back as May 2004 we published a briefing for intermediary firms describing the 'high level' approach that we were adopting in relation to complaints about zeros. We applied a related approach to the other main share classes about which we received complaints – income shares and ordinary shares.

12. As far as I am concerned, the approach as described represented the starting point for our investigation of splits cases, based upon our knowledge and experience of such cases up to then, and it contained sufficient flexibility to allow for the facts of individual cases, for example the specialist knowledge about splits that certain firms possessed.

Structure of the rest of this decision

13. I have set out the main issues in five sections. My formal final decision is set out in section 3.

¹ As the firm's own evidence has demonstrated

- The first section is scene-setting in nature, describing in outline the investment that is at the heart of this dispute. I also describe the market for splits and the problems that were experienced after late 2001 in the splits market. I summarise the FSA and Treasury Select Committee enquiries into these matters that took place after the events and note the arrangements for Fund Distribution Limited under which payments were offered to certain customers.
- In section 2 I describe my approach to assessment of this case.
- In section 3 I set out my findings on the facts of this case in so far as they relate to the circumstances of Mr N.
- In section 4 I examine approaches to redress.
- In section 5 I set out the specific redress in this case.

But first I summarise my findings and decision in this case.

Summary of findings in this case

14. In the present case Mr N had a non-discretionary advisory agreement with RST. His risk profile was medium, and his objective was to maximise his overall return.

15. The firm gave Mr N advice in January 1999 to sell certain of the investments he held in his portfolio and use the proceeds to buy shares in three splits. The purpose of the advice was to help Mr N to achieve a higher income from his portfolio.

16. Mr N followed this advice and in February 1999 invested a total of £47,960 in the ordinary shares of Aberdeen Preferred Income Trust and Geared Income Investment Trust and in the income shares of St David's Investment Trust.

17. In August 2001 Mr N changed his portfolio agreement with the firm to a discretionary one. So from that point onwards, the firm had power to make changes to the portfolio without giving advice or obtaining Mr N's agreement.

18. Mr N's shares in the splits lost much of their value and he complained that the firm's advice to buy these investments as part of his portfolio had been wrong for him.

19. The firm should have realised that its advice to buy the shares in the three splits would result in Mr N holding an unsuitable portfolio: they were higher than medium risk investments and comprised around 17% of the portfolio, with no, or insufficient, lower risk investments to provide a counterbalance.

20. Compensation should be paid in this case by reference to how the splits investments would have performed (as to capital and income yield) in line with the FTSE350 High Yield Index to date, less income received from the actual investments.

SECTION 1: The Split Capital Investment Trust sector

21. In this section I describe in outline the products generally known as Splits which are at the heart of this dispute, describe briefly the problems experienced by many splits and the sector in general in 2001 and note the main enquiries undertaken into these matters by other authorities.

About Splits

22. Split capital investment trusts are, like any other investment trust, limited companies with shares independently listed on the Stock Exchange. Generally initiated by a fund manager or a broker, investment trusts invest in other shares and give private investors a way of investing indirectly in the stock market with potential advantages of diversification within or across sectors. They are therefore in broadly the same market as such collective investments as unit trusts. Unlike unit trusts the value of the investment (represented by the share price) does not directly reflect the underlying asset value, but may be at a premium or a discount to it.

23. Originally the usual structure of a split was to divide the investment return between income shares which were entitled to all of the income, and capital shares which were entitled to all of the capital growth. The main purpose for the capital shares was to provide an investment attractive to high marginal rate tax payers (since the growth was taxed as a capital gain only). Income tax exempt investors, such as pension funds, formed the main market for income shares.

24. Over time modifications began to appear, such as the introduction of further gearing in the form of unsecured loan stock, or variations in the division of income and capital appreciation.

25. The first splits to include zero dividend preference shares ("zeros"), in addition to capital and income shares, were launched in 1987. High capital growth in the 1980s meant that the gearing effect of income shares on the capital growth reduced during the trust's lifetime. Zeros offered investors a fixed target return on capital at redemption (taxed as capital growth). And for investors in capital shares, zeros gave a form of gearing that would not be eroded by the growth of capital shares as a proportion of total assets in the same way as gearing through income shares alone.

26. Subsequent developments included:

- The issuing of ordinary income shares instead of capital shares. These participated in income (as geared by the zeros) but also included participation in any residual capital growth above the fixed growth accrued to the zeros.
- Gearing through bank borrowing as an alternative to zeros, with interest (at a lower rate than the necessary yield on zeros) rolled up and charged to capital.
- Investment policies that included investing in income and ordinary income shares of other splits in order to achieve an attractive yield on the first split's own income shares.

27. Significant development in the sector took place in the late 1990s. As the Treasury Select Committee noted:

28. “Split capital investment trusts began to develop significantly in the 1960s, and by 1987 several dozen such trusts had been launched. 1987 saw the launch of the first splits which had 'zeros' as part of their capital structure. By the end of 1998, over 70 further splits were on the market, the vast majority of which included zeros. In the period 1999 to 2002 there were a further 81. Many of these splits were of the so-called 'barbell' type, with the assets of the trust concentrated at opposite ends of the income/growth spectrum with relatively little in the middle.”²

29. However, financial conditions and market sentiment during 2000 and 2001 triggered a sequence of events which culminated in the collapse of a number of splits. The technology market collapsed, share values in the UK and globally fell. Shares in many splits were suspended. Investors in others suffered losses.

30. So this complaint concerns investment vehicles which had been developed in novel ways in the recent past, resulting in significant structural change. In addition, where the complaints involve zeros, they concern a share class that was relatively new to the investment community and about which there had been increasing enthusiasm across the community in the run up to the relevant advice.

The Treasury Select Committee's enquiries

31. As a response to the losses in the sector, the Treasury Select Committee took evidence and issued the report quoted from above. Its findings can fairly be described as uncomplimentary to the sector. In particular, as relevant to the issues brought to the Financial Ombudsman Service the Committee said:

32. On risk:

“(b) We strongly believe that the splits sector should indeed have 'shouted louder' about the changing nature of the sector. The key point is that any bank gearing made zero shares in splits significantly more risky in falling markets and, the higher the level of borrowing, the greater the danger. It is clear that significantly higher levels of gearing were common in splits launched from around 1999 compared to those in the early 1990s when the major expansion in zeros first began. Virtually all of the holders of zeros were in the dark about the levels of borrowing (paragraph 20).

(c) The increased use of cross-investments in other splits made the shares in splits a much more complex investment than they had previously been. They were potentially more volatile, often more highly geared than was apparent, and certainly more difficult to understand and to monitor. In some cases, it amounted to little more than a sophisticated form of pyramid selling, which we deplore (paragraph 24).

(d) Many zeros launched in the late 1990s (and subsequently) were structured in such a way that, in adverse market conditions, the zeros were not low risk products. They were in effect different from earlier zeros and were now complex derivative products. Even their designers appear not to have fully understood how they would react to falling markets; we regard this as a significant lapse in responsibility. They held particular risks

² House of Commons Treasury Committee, Split Capital Investment Trusts, Third Report of Session 2002-03, HC 418-I

in the event of a significantly falling market; and the fact that such market conditions were not in historical terms likely does not justify them being sold as low risk (paragraph 29, (a)(d))”.

33. On mis-selling:

“(g) It seems clear to us that those primarily responsible for the development of the 'newer' splits—the board members themselves, some trust fund managers and some sponsoring brokers—did not take the steps they could and should have taken to bring the true nature of the risks in zeros to the attention of the wider investment community. We deplore the fact that many investors in the 'newer' zeros were not adequately warned by trust fund managers of the risk to their investment, especially as the managers subsequently increased that risk by substantially increasing gearing (paragraph 41).

(h) We accept that not all individual investors in zeros over the last five or more years are automatically entitled to compensation, even if their investment was made using some form of adviser or intermediary. The circumstances of each case must be examined—initially by the adviser or company concerned but if necessary by the Financial Ombudsman Service—but we are in little doubt that there is a wide range of cases in which it will be found that compensation is justified (paragraph 42).

(i) The statements of risk in the promotional material must be assessed in the wider context of the way in which clients were led to believe that zeros were, overall, a safe investment. The greater was the general belief among inexperienced investors that investments were 'low risk' when they were not, the greater was the onus on those advising them—or on those designing the products and promoting them through advisers—to make clear what the risks were. It was insufficient for the warnings to be little more than small print (paragraph 42).”

The Financial Services Authority's enquiries

34. The FSA undertook its own investigations. In late 2001 it consulted on regulation of the sector and responded to that consultation in May 2002. At the end of 2004 it announced details of a settlement reached with some splits managers and brokers to contribute £194m to a distribution fund (Fund Distribution Ltd) to which investors in zeros could apply. Payment covering partial loss would be made without the consumer needing to establish fault by the firm.

35. Around 500 consumers who had previously complained to the Financial Ombudsman Service have accepted a share in the distribution, in exchange for which they have withdrawn those complaints in whole or in part as a condition of acceptance. The eligible applicants will have received 50.663p in the pound of their losses, after taking into account monies they may have received from other sources.

36. I am of course required to investigate complaints and reach findings independently of other bodies' investigations. The work done by the Treasury Select Committee and the Financial Services Authority is of background interest, but cannot be the basis of my findings. In the following section I describe my approach to this case.

SECTION 2: My approach to deciding this case

37. In this section I set out the approach I have taken to resolving this splits case involving the firm, incorporating consideration of representations that have been made by the parties (primarily the firm through its legal advisers) about this.

General observations

38. The Financial Ombudsman Service is called upon to resolve large numbers of disputes about whether or not various investments were “mis-sold”. The central issue in many is whether or not the investment was “suitable”: that is whether it was a reasonable match for the circumstances of the customer when the advice was given.

39. The assessment of what is or is not suitable includes an understanding of what the customer’s investment objectives were and places considerable weight on an understanding of investment risk, that is the appetite of the complainant for investment risk and the risk involved in the particular investment under consideration. Problems will arise if either the customer’s appetite for risk has not been properly assessed or if the assessed risk does not match the product that is bought. If the firm recommended or selected a product that was not suitable then it is likely to be liable for the losses the complainant has experienced in consequence.

40. Usually customers will take an active part in the assessment of their own appetite for risk and to describe their own investment needs – and although firms too have responsibilities here, this assessment is not generally at issue in these cases.

41. By contrast, the adviser typically has the leading role in assessing the suitability of a product or products to meet those needs within the assessed risk level. In the splits cases the core issue relates to that leading role: that is, whether the firm correctly assessed the degree of risk associated with the investment as suited to the customer’s agreed appetite.

42. The circumstances under which the splits investment came to be selected and held can vary widely. There may have been several splits investments held in a portfolio, and that portfolio may have been held under trust, or be designed for pension provision as a self-invested personal pension. The firm may have had an advisory role, or may have been given discretion to buy and sell investments. The firm may have had a duty to monitor the suitability of the investments. Most commonly the investment or investments will have been one of zero dividend preference shares, income shares or ordinary shares, sometimes a combination. In this case, Mr N had an ‘advisory’ (later ‘discretionary’) portfolio, part of which was invested in ‘ordinary’ and ‘income’ shares.

43. Similarly firms have told me that they adopted at different times widely varying approaches to assessing the risk of the splits products they recommended. Many made general assumptions about the level of risk associated with splits, some relied on the descriptions given by splits providers, whilst others conducted some analysis of the sector and a few of individual products. But of course any such analysis was carried out at different times and firms have not generally been able to document the particular enquiries, if any, that they carried out.

44. As complainants have pointed out, a critical issue is whether the analysis carried out by the individual firms was adequate to assess the risks of splits products. The firms say that they did not expect that what did happen in the splits sector, would. Consumers tend to view this as a collective failure: the enhanced risks of the products were clear and well known

(they say), or at least should have been to the firms. Indeed some customers would argue that there was a “magic-circle” of financial firms in the know about the true risks associated with splits who nonetheless actively recommended splits to their clients. Firms say that they should be judged by the standards applying to reasonably competent advisers: that they, like many of their peers, were acting competently and that the risks were either unforeseeable, or not such that they ought to have been foreseen. They also say that their assessments of risk and suitability were reasonable when considered against the standards of the day.

45. The assessment of the suitability and risk of a financial product is not a precise science. There is not for example a universally accepted description of different levels of risk, let alone a generally agreed methodology for assessing the risks of products. A financial adviser is expected to exercise reasonable judgement bearing in mind the legal and regulatory responsibilities. Inevitably given the nature of financial markets and the analysis of risk, genuine differences of view will emerge about both the appropriate methodology for undertaking assessments and, more important, the level of risk that ought properly to be ascribed to a particular product.

46. In resolving disputes between advisers and customers it is not my role to substitute my own judgement for that of a reasonably competent adviser. But equally I cannot stand back and simply assume that the adviser in question has advised competently.

47. The question I need to resolve is whether or not a particular sale of a particular product (or a particular portfolio) was suitable for the particular client. In addressing that question I have taken into account what the firm has said about how it assessed the risks of splits investments (and portfolios of which they formed part). However, what I must decide is whether the risk profile that the firm attributed to the investment (or the portfolio) properly reflected the risk factors that ought fairly to have been known to the firm at the relevant time. (I say more about ‘portfolio complaints’ later in this decision.)

48. My approach therefore has been to consider how I should assess whether or not the firm’s conclusion about the risks associated with a particular splits investment was mistaken, and in consequence the particular product at a particular time was suitable or unsuitable for the customer. This will take into account the firm’s varying levels of knowledge and/or experience at different times as well as the fundamentals of the products in question. So I must form a view on what risk factors this particular firm should have taken into account at a particular time when assessing a particular splits investment, and what conclusions about the risk profile of the investment the firm should have drawn.

49. The starting point for forming such a view may well be the sort of risk factors of which, by particular times, I consider a financial firm like this firm should have fairly been on notice. But I must additionally consider what, if any, specialist knowledge the firm also possessed.

50. Inevitably this results in some sharp dividing lines being drawn. For example, it may be fair for me to distinguish cases involving the firm based in part on the time that the advice was given, because I think it reasonable that understanding of the risks associated with products and the assessments that the firm should have been expected to make should have developed over time. Later recommendations may be more difficult to sustain than early ones. The effect can appear arbitrary. Advice given on one day may in accordance with such an approach be seen as appropriate whereas the same advice on the next day would be viewed as unsuitable.

51. I have therefore needed to think carefully about where these lines should be drawn in relation to this firm. I have in fact chosen these points cautiously. That is, for example, to identify not the first point where concerns might have been raised but the point where it is reasonably clear that the firm's level of awareness of an issue was (or should have been) such as to raise questions whether earlier analysis had been sufficient and appropriate.

52. The submissions I have received have been, in large part, intended to persuade me that my proposed approach is inappropriate. This document is a decision in an individual case. However, it will help if I explain my approach and the justification for it at some length, taking into account all the submissions that I have received.

53. This is not a debate, with the Financial Ombudsman Service arguing one view against the position put up by the firms involved and/or their advisers. Our independent and impartial role is investigative, inquisitorial and, ultimately, to act as arbiter. We sit in the middle of two sides, the firm and the consumer. Where one side is more vocal than the other (as the firms have been in these cases) the reality may be obscured that there are two disputing parties, with a quasi-judicial ombudsman service making a decision on fair and reasonable grounds as to whether the firm is at fault and, if so, what the consequences were for the consumer.

Approach to this decision

54. At the risk of some simplification, many firms have told us that they had a generalised approach to assessing the risks of splits. Splits were a relatively specialist product so there was no agreed approach to assessing risks. Typically, however, they considered zeros to be low risk products as they were sheltered from the market by the other share classes over which they had preference and no zero had yet failed to pay out its target value. And many firms were accustomed to recommending ordinary income shares in splits as medium risk investments.

55. Set against this approach was a gathering body of comment and evidence that pointed to particular potential problems with splits products and in particular to certain elements of the product. As that wider understanding developed I find that the firm should have included in its assessment of the product a consideration of some of the factors that had been highlighted as giving rise to particular risks. Given that developing understanding, it was no longer prudent for the firm to assume that all splits, or all shares within a particular class of splits shares, could simply be treated as a group.

56. So, bearing in mind the developing understanding of the splits products, what would proper enquiries by the firm have disclosed? To reach a view on this I consider various indicators to distinguish one split from another bearing in mind the risks that were being increasingly understood. In summary I consider in particular:

- any relevant marketing material (the statements made by splits providers)
- asset cover (for zeros and certain income shares)
- the level of bank borrowings of the split and any structural gearing
- the level of investment by the split in other investment trusts

57. I take into account how understanding of the risks developed over time and how that would fairly have been reflected in increasingly in-depth risk assessments. I also take into account the extent of expertise and knowledge available to the firm.

58. So the effect of this approach is not that the firm ought suddenly to have been stringent in its risk assessments – nor, to put it another way, that if the firm had been more stringent, it would necessarily have reached a conclusion as to risk different from the one it in fact held. The effect is that, with the passage of time, applying the knowledge accessible to the firm and the expertise it could reasonably have been expected to have, it would have reached increasingly informed views about risk, so concluding, by certain points in time at the latest, that particular investments were not suitable for some of its customers, given their established risk appetites.

Portfolio complaints

59. Many complaints involve a portfolio of investments that was constructed according to the firm's advice and/or managed by the firm in line with a particular risk profile and objective; for example, a low risk portfolio or medium risk portfolio, with an objective of producing income or capital growth. In nearly all such cases the agreement between the firm and the customer was that the portfolio overall should satisfy those criteria, but subject to that, individual investments/products within the portfolio might differ from them.

60. So in such cases it was normally not enough for the firm just to assess the risk level and characteristics of a particular investment on its own – although that should always be the starting point. The next stage should then be to assess the risk profile and characteristics of the portfolio overall, which involved assessing all the investments/products in the portfolio and what their respective risk levels and features added up to.

61. References in this decision to “suitable” and “unsuitable” investments or products should be understood with these points in mind, where the splits investments formed part of a wider portfolio. In such cases, it was not the individual investments or products that were suitable or unsuitable in isolation, but the portfolio as a whole. But the starting point was still to assess the risk level and other characteristics of the splits investments.

Considerations in deciding my approach

62. Overall, in deciding my approach to this firm's complaint, I have:

- collated commentaries made by observers both in the specialist and general arenas before and at the time of the events complained of
- researched and reviewed the prospectuses and marketing literature of the splits concerned
- reviewed the views expressed by the regulator at the time
- carefully considered submissions made directly by the firm, the complainants, and by their representatives

63. In addition, I have, of course, been able to draw on the Financial Ombudsman Service's considerable experience in investment matters across the Service, since broadly investment related complaints have historically formed a significant proportion of the

complaints dealt with by the Financial Ombudsman Service and its predecessor organisations.

64. The reports with which I have been provided run to many hundreds of pages. They have been read and considered in detail, and what follows includes consideration of the issues in the light of them. It would neither be helpful nor practicable to deal with them piecemeal in this document. But, to be clear, the documents that have been taken into account are:

A report on market practice and splits by a market practitioner

A splits expert's report on the nature of zeros and other split capital shares

The same expert's report on publications about splits

The same expert's commentary on splits

The same expert's response to the Financial Ombudsman Service's comments about his report on the nature of zeros and other split capital shares

An academic's analysis of risks associated with splits

The same academic's report on the Financial Ombudsman Service's approach to calculating redress for income shares in splits

A legal opinion on redress for splits

A further legal opinion on redress and related issues, relating to splits

and the miscellaneous submissions made on the firm's behalf by its solicitors.

65. In the remainder of this section I set out the central matters that I have considered in formulating my approach to this complaint. Some of the evaluation and conclusions reached are included here, or given particular emphasis, because they have been specifically raised in the submissions referred to above. However, I am not required to deal with every submission in the same degree of detail – and in general my assessments are made in the light of submissions rather than as point by point observations on them.

66. I look at:

(a) How understanding of splits and the underlying risks developed over time, to decide whether and when the firm should have responded to that understanding in its risk assessments.

(b) whether the firm can be regarded as having more knowledge about splits than other firms.

(c) the understanding and assessment of risk, in general and as applied to splits, to decide what conclusions the firm could have reached, had it responded when I consider it should, in making investment decisions and recommendations for its customers.

(d) a particular objection; namely that the fact that the regulators did not identify these matters as systemic and then step in, is argued to imply that the firm need not itself have responded to changes in the sector.

(e) submissions made by splits complainants who read the three representative provisional decisions posted on the Financial Ombudsman Service website.

(a) the developing understanding

67. I considered, in formulating my approach, when the firm should have been on notice that when assessing risk it needed to consider carefully the particular issues in the splits sector, rather than adopt more generic approaches.

68. Complainants have tended to argue that the particular risks of splits were (or at least should have been) evident from very early on. In contrast firms may argue that particular issues in the sector only became evident to them when problems emerged and could not have been evident beforehand.

69. As mentioned above, the Financial Ombudsman Service has researched contemporary articles and other publications. They are summarised, with comment, in a document published on our website³. In response I have been supplied with a report prepared by a splits expert (but the views expressed are the expert's own) about publications on splits.

70. The material summarised on our website is not intended to be a representative sample. Any information in the public domain that warned or cautioned about splits was relevant. The question is when, prompted by the background noise if nothing else, the firm's risk assessments ought to have changed to a fuller examination of the particular investments. While the adverse or cautionary material was outweighed in quantity for much of the time by material that was neutral or supportive that does not mean it should have been ignored.

71. Some of the adverse/cautionary commentaries refer specifically to ordinary or income shares, as distinct from zeros. However, observations about the risk of such shares are relevant to complaints about zeros too, since they constituted warnings about assets. In any trust with zeros, as net assets fell there was a greater risk that the zeros' redemption value would no longer be covered.

72. As well as the material we have published, some of the splits expert's comments (in Section 3 of his report) can be taken to support the view that by a certain time the firm would have been aware of risk factors such as asset cover, gearing (financial and structural) and holdings in other investment trusts. He notes in several places that it was accepted that:

- it was well established that gearing is a risk factor with positive and negative effects;
- geared shares performed poorly in falling markets - although he also says (particularly in relation to the breaching of debt covenants) that the probability of an extreme market was very low.

³ <http://www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk/publications/guidance/splitsguide-annex.pdf>

73. He also, in distinguishing between zeros and income shares/ordinary income shares, notes that the latter were “always marketed as high risk”.

74. It has been argued⁴ that the pricing of shares in the market did not indicate that the market perceived that risks were increasing and/or that the change in the structure of splits – including gearing via bank borrowing – created substantial risks. There was, it is said, no significant risk premium. The point being made is that if there had been such a premium it would have indicated to practitioners that there was a hitherto unrecognised risk that needed to be taken into account. There is a somewhat circular argument here: in effect it is said there needed to be an identifiable risk premium set by the market in order for the market to identify risk.

75. But anyway, market prices are not necessarily a reliable indicator of risk profile, because they reflect not only the anticipated risk but also the anticipated reward. A medium-risk high-yield investment can attract a higher market price than a low-risk medium-yield investment. That is especially so because market prices are largely set by and for market professionals – who are well able to assess the trade-off between risk and reward. Additionally, in practice sentiment – such as misplaced enthusiasm in a sector - can simply mean that pricing is “wrong”, whether over- or under-valuing shares. If there was no significant risk premium, that could easily have been because the risk had been underestimated.

76. I have taken into account the publicly available material, and had regard to the pricing points made above as well as all of the submissions on the issue of knowledge and understanding.

77. So at what point was the background such that this firm should have looked more deeply into individual investments before making its recommendations? To identify this I have also looked to see whether this firm can be regarded as having more knowledge about splits than other firms.

(b) the knowledge and expertise of the firm

78. In seeking to establish the extent of the firm's responsibilities to a complainant, I have considered what were the practices of the profession at the time. At law, a firm would be required to exercise the ordinary skills of an ordinary competent professional carrying on that particular activity at that particular time. It is well established that, whilst evidence of what constituted responsible professional practice may be presented and considered, ultimately it is for the court to decide what was the standard of reasonable care⁵. So, where a significant number of firms have failed to act responsibly, the law may conclude, and I think it is only fair and reasonable, that individual firms should be judged by how they ought reasonably to have operated, rather than by how that significant number operated, having regard to the individual firm's level of specialism.

79. And regarding special skills, I have found that some firms clearly had more knowledge and understanding of splits than other firms operating in the same market. In effect, they were specialists. So, firms that were sponsoring brokers of split capital investment trusts must, by virtue of that role, reasonably be taken to have possessed special

⁴ In, for example, the market practitioner's

⁵ Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee [1957]; Bolitho v City & Hackney Health Authority [1997 – House of Lords]

expertise in splits and to have acquired or been in a position to acquire an earlier knowledge of certain risk factors – in particular the significance of bank borrowings and of investments in other investment trusts. Such firms, as specialists, are to be judged by the standards of other such specialist firms. Their responsibilities therefore were greater than those of other non-specialist firms. It is well established that professionals possessing special skills should exhibit a standard of care commensurate with those skills⁶. And a corporate body is normally to be attributed with all the knowledge and skills that its various employees and departments possess⁷.

80. Some firms have argued that any such special expertise was possessed only by their corporate department and should not be fairly attributed to their retail/private client department, because of 'Chinese walls'. However, Chinese walls only prevent the dissemination of confidential or price-sensitive information, not the sort of expertise that I mean here. Indeed, the Financial Ombudsman Service is aware of cases where the private client department specifically sought and/or obtained advice from the corporate department, without any impropriety; and where the firm in question referred to its corporate involvement in splits and to the knowledge it gained from that, when recommending a splits investment to a client.

81. I do not accept that the attribution of the corporate department's specialist knowledge, in the sense in which I have described it, to the whole of a firm results, or would tend to result, in breaches of confidentiality or conflicts of interest, or puts that firm at risk of regulatory breaches, or that it places that firm, or any department of that firm, under a constant duty to monitor splits investments generally.

82. On the basis of the evidence I have seen, I find the firm to have possessed specialist knowledge and expertise greater than that possessed by the generality of firms that advised on splits. I say this because I note that the firm has been a sponsoring broker of split capital investment trusts since the 1990s, and I consider that the firm must have acquired, from those activities and the general and specialist literature, a 'specialist' knowledge of splits by no later than September 1998. So I find that at least by September 1998 the firm ought to have been aware of the particular risk factors, including bank gearing and investment in other investment trusts, to which I refer.

83. Next I explain how I have decided to assess the likely outcome for customers of the adjustments in approach that I consider the firm should have made. To do that, I have needed to reach conclusions about risk and how the firm ought reasonably to have assessed it in relation to splits.

(c) understanding and assessment of risk

84. As I said earlier, it would not be sufficient simply to try and assess what the firm did, in relation to each transaction, based on the firm's own risk assessment methodology. I have instead to decide on an approach that fairly reproduces risk assessments that are no less accurate than assessments I consider the firm's customers ought to have benefited from at the relevant time.

⁶ Matrix Securities Ltd v Theodore Goddard [1998]; Seventh Earl of Malmesbury v Strutt & Parker [2007]

⁷ E.g Real Estate Opportunities Ltd v Aberdeen Asset Managers & UBS [2007 – Court of Appeal paragraph 49]

Risk and suitability

85. The purpose of the risk assessment of the product is to match it with the customer to ensure its suitability. So it is necessary to be clear about the parties' proper understanding of risk.

86. In some of the representations I have received it has been put forward that "risk", as a term of art in the investment world, applies to the uncertainty surrounding both good and bad outcomes. However, to most people "risk" relates to adverse outcomes only. The opposite side of the coin is reward. In this document the word "risk" is taken to have been intended and understood in the ordinary sense – that is, as applying to the degree of possibility of adverse outcomes alone.

87. There are well recognised difficulties in quantifying and describing risk. Descriptions such as "medium risk" or "low risk" mean different things to different people. And of course they are on a continuum, there being no clear dividing line between different risk levels. Common terminology amongst practitioners might typically be to classify the risk attributes of a particular investment as "low", "medium" or "high"⁸. But, like points of the compass, where there are theoretically infinite points in between the cardinals, there are gradations of risk in between the commonly agreed terms. Unlike the points of the compass there is no absolute consensus as to what even the main terms mean, though there may well be a great deal of common ground.

88. The splits expert, in Part 1 of his report on the nature of zeros and other splits capital shares makes a series of observations about perception and assessment of risk, most of which are consistent with the observations above. There is one significant point on which he appears to differ. He says that risk can be measured objectively and that "...risk statements contained in published documents should not be interpreted by what any one individual investor might understand, as different investors interpret it in different ways." That statement must be right, because of the emphasis on "one individual investor". The interpretation of risk statements should be based on what its intended audience in general would have understood. But in looking at an individual case one cannot exclude what the particular individual reasonably and predictably would have understood in the light of his or her own experience and needs, and any discussions surrounding the investment decision.

89. In this case and similar ones the complaint can only succeed if the actual risk ought to have been recognised as higher than the risk that the consumer agreed to or ought to have been invited to take, with allowances for some imprecision in the definitions and their interpretation at the margins. So it is not helpful to engage in discussion of whether some artificial line has been crossed between, say, "medium" and "high", or between "medium" and "medium high". If the actual risk should have been identified at the time, making allowance for marginal imprecision, as higher than the acceptable level then that is enough.

Assessment of risk in splits investments

90. As I have previously said, the following features are most obviously potentially relevant to assessing the suitability of investments in 'splits':

- any relevant marketing material (the statements made by splits providers)

⁸ The market practitioner's report predominantly uses a three-point scale.

- asset cover (for zeros and certain income shares)
- the level of bank borrowings of the split and any structural gearing
- the level of investment by the split in other investment trusts.

91. I consider that in deciding what risk assessments the firm would have reached acting properly, these are the features I should have regard to. There could be arguments about the relevance of other features – and about whether these particular features will always give a consistent and reliable picture of risk. However, the starting point is that these features undoubtedly bear upon the risk level of investments in splits, and they were referred to in general and specialist literature about splits to which the firm can fairly be assumed to have had access (newspaper articles, trade and investment journals and so on).

92. The first feature is specific to the particular investment. This is how I consider the final three features listed above impact on the risk assessment of specific splits.

1) *Asset cover*

Asset cover is an accepted factor in assessing risk. At any given point the market is as likely to fall as to rise and over a long period the market, or more particularly the underlying portfolio, could fall, recover and fall again. These fluctuations will be reflected in the asset cover at any point in time and affect risk. So it is not the case, as might be argued, that having asset cover of at least 100% is only significant if the trust is due to wind up. The increased risk is not just notional. And if the trust's assets have fallen to the extent that its debt covenants are breached, there is a risk that it may go into immediate liquidation even if it is not due to wind up.

There was (and still is) no one particular way of measuring the asset cover for zeros. I am aware that different firms have used different methods and the same firm may have used different methods at different times to reflect a changing perception of the factors that affect the asset cover.

For example, the Association of Investment Trust Companies (AITC) calculated the asset cover in a particular way until November 2000 for its monthly statistics report. It slightly changed the method from December 2000. In July 2001 it introduced an additional measure of evaluating the asset cover. It called that the 'debt cover method'.

The formula I consider appropriate for use in deciding these cases to determine the asset cover of zeros – acknowledging that the other methods exist, is:

$$\frac{\text{TA} - \text{PC}}{\text{ZRV}}$$

Where: TA = Total Assets; PC = Prior Charges; ZRV = Zeros total redemption value. This was the method most firms used at the relevant time. It was, and still is, the method used by AITC⁹.

⁹ From December 2000, the AITC slightly modified this formula to allow for estimated future expenses. This was done by deducting the estimated future expenses from the total assets in the numerator. This

However, the method does not specifically allow for the effect of borrowings or holdings in other investment trusts. For example, consider this trust:

TA = £100m; PC = £50m; ZRV = £30m.

Applying the formula, the zeros' asset cover would be 167%. This might seem to indicate that the zeros were substantially covered. However, if we take into account all 'debts' including borrowings, there are only 25% excess assets. The method does not give a complete picture where borrowings need to be taken into account.

One way to allow for this would be to include the borrowings in the denominator instead of subtracting it from the total assets. This is the 'debt cover' method used by AITC from July 2001. But this still does not allow for the effect of indirect gearing introduced through holdings in other investment trusts.

I consider that the effect of prior charges and holdings in other investment trusts should be taken into account separately from asset cover. They are discussed below.

In summary, I consider that asset cover must form part of the firm's risk assessment after a certain date, given its potential significance to investment outcomes. As part of the risk assessments in this decision I consider that adequacy of asset cover should be considered in the context of a substantial, but not impossible, fall in assets.

What this means in practice is that I consider that asset cover should have informed a non-specialist firm's risk assessment of zeros from 1 December 1999 at the latest. I consider that, from that time (at the latest), a zero with asset cover of less than 125% (i.e. its target value is not capable of withstanding a 20% fall in assets) should have been regarded by such a firm as a higher than low risk investment. But a zero with asset cover of 125% or more was not necessarily low risk, if the firm ought to have taken other risk factors, like bank borrowings, into account as well.

And I consider that an income share, possessing a target value and prior-ranking zeros, with asset cover of less than 154%¹⁰ (i.e. its target value is not capable of withstanding a 35% fall in assets) should have been regarded by such a firm as a higher than medium risk investment. But an income share with asset cover of 154% or more was not necessarily medium risk, if the firm ought to have taken other risk factors, like bank borrowings, into account as well.

2) Bank borrowings and structural gearing

All splits involve a structure that means some classes of share get a higher capital return and some get a higher income return. This 'structural gearing' is inherent in the nature of a split.

Whilst zeros are a type of structural gearing, structural gearing does not have to involve the use of zeros and zeros are not inherent in the nature of a split capital investment trust company.

has the effect of slightly reducing the asset cover. However, not all trusts subscribed to AITC and hence firms would have to estimate future expenses themselves if not available in the AITC report. Bearing in mind the practical difficulties of doing so, especially for the smaller firms and given its limited impact, I have decided not to modify the formula to include future expenses - even for calculations after December 2000.

¹⁰ Significantly higher than 125%, to take account of the structural gearing produced by the zeros.

Some splits chose to borrow in the hope of producing increased returns - 'financial gearing'. Unlike structural gearing, borrowing is not an inherent feature of a split. It is not, in risk terms, equivalent to zeros. A zero holder's entitlement to full repayment can be affected by whether a split capital investment trust company's gearing is wholly through zeros or part zeros and part bank borrowing.

If the gearing is wholly by zeros, the zeros come equal first. Even if there were some shortfall, the zeros would at least share between themselves what assets there were. If the gearing is partly by borrowing, the zeros come second. The borrowing might eat up some or all of the assets, before the zeros got anything.

If the underlying investments appreciate, the non-zero shareholders will reap the greater benefit from any borrowing, while the zero holders' gain will be restricted to the predetermined maturity value.

If the underlying investments depreciate, the borrowing will impact first on the non-zero shares. But, in such circumstances, it increases the prospect of wiping out the value of the non-zero shares, and so increases the prospect of the zeros being affected. So, from the point of view of a zero holder, bank borrowing has clear potential disadvantages in the bad times, but no clear benefits in the good times.

So gearing through bank borrowing needs to be taken account of as a risk factor. However, I consider that for a non-specialist firm it should only be taken into account in considering investment decisions and recommendations made from 1 May 2001 onwards. I consider that by then at the latest, such a firm ought to have made a further adjustment to its thinking. Having regard to gearing in addition to asset cover, is in my view a fair proxy for that adjustment.

In deciding quite how the firm should have taken account of it, I have considered the effect of a range of percentages of financial gearing.

- At 20% gearing, that percentage of a split's underlying portfolio is financed by borrowing. The actual amount of the borrowing is fixed and therefore is constant but the value of the underlying portfolio is variable. Consequently, the percentage of debt gearing varies inversely with the value of the underlying portfolio.
- With financial gearing of 20% a fall in the underlying portfolio value of an investment trust would manifest itself in the net asset value of the investment trust's ordinary shares - ignoring any other gearing which may be present through structural gearing (prior ranking zero dividend preference shares, income shares etc.) – thus experiencing a fall 25% greater than would an un-gearred ordinary share.
- A 30% fall in the value of the underlying portfolio would result in a fall in the net asset value of 37.5%. Furthermore the investment trust is no longer geared at 20% but at 28.57% giving a compounding effect to any further weakness in the underlying portfolio.
- Bearing in mind that the ordinary shares of a split capital investment trust would be further geared by the structural gearing resulting from prior share classes this would make them more vulnerable to falling stock market conditions than the ordinary shares of an un-gearred conventional investment trust. It also means that

the impact of falling markets on the other share classes would be more pronounced than in an un-gearred trust.

So, at 20% debt¹¹ gearing I consider the potential level of risk magnification significant enough to raise the risk rating of an investment in a split. If it would have been low without gearing, I consider the firm should regard it as higher than low with such gearing.

At 40% gearing I consider the gearing magnification effect sufficient to increase the risk profile of the share classes further.

Structural gearing – that is, gearing via prior-ranking share classes, typically zeros - is relevant to assessing the risks of subordinate share classes in splits, typically ‘ordinary shares’, sometimes called ‘ordinary income shares’, and ‘income shares’. Ordinary shares and income shares will be riskier than zeros in the same split. So, in addition to the effects produced by structural gearing, the risk factors relevant at any particular time to zeros will also be relevant to ordinary shares and income shares.

3) *Investment by the split in other investment trusts (IT's)*

Diversification as a general strategy can reduce risk. But investment by splits in other IT's can have opposite effects.

First, holdings by one split in a relatively small number of other IT's can cause liquidity problems if one or more large holder wishes, or is forced, to sell.

Second, investment stays concentrated in the investment trust sector. So although the trusts invested in may themselves focus on different classes of investment or different sectors, the split is vulnerable to difficulties within the investment trust sector.

Third, holdings in other IT's can affect the level of gearing carried by the zeros and/or income shares of a split, if the IT's in which it invests have significant levels of borrowing.

Fourth, several layers of holdings - IT's investing in IT's investing in IT's etc. - can make it difficult to see a potential shortfall in the value of the underlying assets. So:

- If split A buys zeros in split B, whose zeros are trading at a premium to the value of the underlying assets, the value of split A's assets is based on split B's share price rather than the value of its underlying assets.
- And if split B's underlying assets include zeros in split C, whose zeros are trading at a premium to the value of the underlying assets, the value of split B's assets is based on split capital investment trust company C's share price rather than the value of its underlying assets.
- As AITC put it to the Treasury Committee, there could be premium piled on premium, which might prove unsustainable. As AITC said – “Total asset values of some funds therefore depend upon the market price of others.”

¹¹ I have carefully considered market practitioner's opinion on the significance of 30% gearing.

Given these factors, I am clear that the firm ought to have taken into account the extent of investment in other IT's in reaching a proper risk assessment.

As with financial gearing, in my judgment, for a non-specialist firm, investments in other IT's should only be taken into account in considering investment decisions and recommendations made from 1 May 2001 onwards. And as with financial gearing, in deciding quite how firms should have taken account of investment in other IT's, I have considered the possible effects of such investment.

93. It is difficult – because of the interactions described above - to establish an exact risk effect of any particular percentage of investment in other investment trust companies by a split capital investment trust company. But that fact itself, in adding to unknowns, increases the risk involved. However, I consider the potential adverse effects of a percentage investment in other investment trusts as being at least equivalent to the potential adverse effect of a similar percentage of debt gearing.

94. Given that the effects can be taken to be broadly equivalent, it is reasonable, for the purposes of my proposed approach, to amalgamate the two influences. Thus, for example, I regard debt gearing of 30% as equivalent to debt gearing of 15% combined with 15% investment in other IT's.

(d) the regulators

95. The firm has suggested¹² that it should not be blamed for not recognising risk factors that the regulators themselves did not recognise or regard as sufficiently serious at the time.

96. The regulatory responsibility for firms advising on splits lay with IMRO, the SFA and (for some intermediaries) the Personal Investment Authority (PIA). Later the Financial Services Authority (FSA) took its statutory powers, replacing these self-regulatory organisations.

97. In certain respects my approach to this complaint finds some support in what the regulators were doing. For instance:

Gearing and asset cover as risk factors

Information about asset cover and gearing were included in prospectuses launching - or amending the capital structure of - split capital investment trusts, indicating that the FSA as listing authority was aware of them as risk factors.

Cross holdings as a risk factor

In February 2001 IMRO was sufficiently concerned about cross holdings as a risk factor to set up a project. This project was to assess the risk concentration in the holdings of splits and the possibility of a collapse in the sector being caused by, in isolation, cross holdings. This culminated in a report dated April 2001.

In the light of IMRO's concerns the PIA issued a regulatory update in March 2001 which included a warning on 'income shares' in splits. The regulatory update warned

¹² For example, via its solicitors

that “it is important that the structure of these products and the risks involved are carefully explained to customers before they commit themselves”.

98. It was the FSA that took the most active steps in relation to splits. On 8 November 2002 the FSA published a note entitled “Further memorandum from the Financial Services Authority”. It records that risk warnings in the prospectuses issued even before April 2001 specifically identified the risks of gearing and the potential impact of the failure of one trust on others invested in it.

99. In the memorandum referred to above, the FSA looked at two subjects: the information they received from the Guernsey regulator about splits, and the role of the UK Listing Authority in approving prospectuses for listing. I consider it is of questionable value to take this relatively confined area of work and extrapolate findings (or the absence of them) to other areas such as the adviser’s responsibility towards individual investors.

100. In particular the FSA was looking to see whether there was a systemic risk from the risk concentration in the holdings of splits. The memorandum referred to above said that the FSA considered “systemic risk” to mean a threat to the stability of the financial system and that problems in the splits sector were not expected to be a risk in this sense – and they have not turned out to be.

101. The memorandum notes that the IMRO project on splits concluded in April 2001 that the risk concentrations did not indicate a problem for the splits sector as a whole. It also seems from Mr Tiner’s comments to the Treasury Select Committee that investigations carried out in early 2001 might have specifically looked at the concerns about the supposed magic circle allegations at the time. (I do not have special knowledge of what FSA in fact did.)

102. So FSA’s investigations were focussed primarily on the impact on the stability of the financial system and to the splits sector as a whole (perhaps with particular reference to the magic circle allegations). That they did not take any action does not mean that in an individual split the extent of holdings in other investment trusts were not a risk factor to be taken into account.

103. In fact, according to the memorandum, in October 2001 the FSA had analysed the interaction of gearing and cross holdings and had concluded that there was risk to the splits sector as a whole due to crossholdings. But the report concluded that the market would have to fall further for large number of funds to become insolvent. The FSA’s concern was about the potential for large scale insolvencies in the splits sector and not about some individual zeros being unable to pay their stated target values. Their activity is quite different from the Financial Ombudsman Service’s determination of risk levels inherent in particular transactions in the context of the objectives and risk attitude of individual investors.

104. I have taken into account what the regulators themselves did, and the views they expressed. It would not, however, be right to take their activity and observations – or the fact that they did or did not act at any particular point - as defining the reasonable knowledge of a firm at the time, or as giving tacit approval to firms’ approaches. It is not an exact analogy, but if an authority having responsibility for road speed limits were to review a limit and decide it was right for a particular stretch, it would remain the driver’s responsibility to drive within the limit and with due care. The firms themselves were charged with fulfilling regulatory obligations as to suitability. It was their direct responsibility, not the regulators’, to do that.

105. The regulators would not normally be expected to know as much at any given time as did the firms actually transacting business. Anything that the regulators might have done would be essentially after the event and based on what they themselves could establish in their investigations. Finally, none of what the regulators said or did was expressed to be conclusive.

106. For these reasons I do not consider that the fact that the regulators did not step in until somewhat later than the dates I have identified should cause me to reconsider those dates. Indeed, it may be that a time lag before regulatory action is more likely than not in such circumstances.

(e) other complainants' submissions

107. I wrote to all complainants with unresolved splits complaints that involve the nine firms represented by solicitors Barlow Lyde & Gilbert, drawing their attention to the three representative provisional decisions dated 1 February 2007 posted on the Financial Ombudsman Service website and inviting them to make written submissions if they wished.

108. I received submissions from 12 such complainants, which I copied to Barlow Lyde & Gilbert. Six of the 12 submissions related to the specific facts of the complainants' cases and had no relevance beyond those individual cases.

109. Four of the remaining submissions disagreed with my provisional treatment, for risk assessment purposes, of zeros for which the complainant accepted payments from Fund Distribution Ltd (FDL); this treatment was evident from 'provisional decision A' on our website. I was minded to treat such zeros as suitable for the complainant's investment portfolio, as payments from FDL had to be accepted in full and final settlement of any complaint involving the relevant zeros.

110. The complainants mainly argued that this was unfair to them as, when they were required to decide whether or not to accept the FDL payments, they did not yet know what decision the Financial Ombudsman Service would ultimately make on their complaint. If they had known this earlier, as they felt they could legitimately expect, they would not have felt obliged to accept the FDL payments.

111. Whilst I can see that complainants faced a hard choice and I therefore sympathise, I do not think it fair or reasonable to ignore the legally binding promise that they freely made when they accepted the FDL payments. A significant number of complainants did indeed reject their FDL offer and so their complaints could continue to be investigated by us unaffected.

112. Another complainant thought he could tell from the provisional decisions that the proportion of higher risk splits investments in a portfolio had to be at least 40% before I was minded to find the portfolio 'unbalanced' and uphold the complaint. But that is wrong. Each case depended on its facts and on the precise composition of the portfolio.

113. Another complainant considered it unfair that her complaint should be affected and therefore delayed by my consideration of the general issues concerning splits. Again I

sympathise, but I have not seen how I could make fair and reasonable decisions on complaints involving splits investments without careful consideration of these issues.

114. Finally, one complainant, whilst accepting my general approach to assessing the suitability of an investment portfolio¹³, queried whether certain zeros were not always unsuitable, regardless of the overall risk profile of the portfolio. The complainant argued the point well but ultimately I have not been persuaded to change my approach. The issue is at what point I can fairly and reasonably decide that a breach of duty has occurred. The duty in question - the bargain struck between the parties - was in relation to the portfolio as a whole, not individual investments within it.

¹³ which is to assess the suitability of the whole portfolio, not individual investments within it

SECTION 3: Mr N's complaint against Firm RST

Complaint

Mr N's complaint concerns the firm's advice to him to purchase shares in three split capital investment trusts ('splits') as part of his investment portfolio with the firm. He says that the investments were recommended to him by the firm as being relatively low risk and a way of obtaining much-needed income. He does not now believe that this is the case, following the total loss of the capital he invested.

I have considered:

- i. whether the firm owed Mr N certain responsibilities
- ii. what was the nature of those responsibilities?
- iii. did the firm fail somehow in carrying out those responsibilities?
- iv. has Mr N suffered loss as a result of those failures on the firm's part?
- v. is it fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case for the firm to be held responsible?

Circumstances

Mr N signed an advisory client agreement with the firm in June 1997. This stated that he wished to have a medium risk portfolio to maximise his overall return.

The firm wrote to Mr N on 18 January 1999, following a telephone call discussing his investment requirements. The firm recommended that he sell several holdings in his portfolio and reinvest in three split capital investment trusts which offered above-average income returns at the time.

Subsequently, the following purchases were made on Mr N's behalf on 11 February 1999:

– Second St David's Investment Trust income shares	£16,631
– Aberdeen Preferred Income Trust ordinary shares	£16,530
– Geared Income Investment Trust ordinary shares	£14,799

So a total of £47,960 was invested in splits within the portfolio.

In August 2001, Mr N changed his investment agreement with the firm to a discretionary managed one. However, it appears that his investment objectives and risk profile remained unchanged.

Following significant losses, Mr N registered a formal complaint with the firm about the splits he had purchased and their effect on his portfolio, in January 2002. This complaint was rejected by the firm in September 2003 on the grounds that the advice given had been suitable for Mr N's investment objectives and attitude to risk. Mr N decided to refer the complaint to this service for consideration.

The firm's submissions

The firm has made the following case-specific points in response to the complaint:

- Mr N approached the firm in January 1999 with the specific objective of improving the income return on his existing portfolio.
- Mr N required an overall medium risk portfolio in which he wanted to maximise the rate of return.
- There was no duty on the firm to monitor the suitability of Mr N's portfolio until the account became discretionary on 9 August 2001.
- The firm's definition of a medium risk portfolio included holdings in collective investments – split capital investment trust would fall under that definition.
- At the time the investments were recommended, the risk associated with splits was considered suitable for Mr N's portfolio.
- Ordinary income shares had given investors a steady yield over a number of years. They gave higher yields than deposits, with less volatility than individual equities. Therefore they were appropriate for investors seeking income.
- Mr N received a total of £13,805 in income payments from the three investments during the period they were held.
- The firm did not recommend the three splits investments to Mr N as 'low risk', as he claims. The products were purchased with proceeds from the sale of some direct equities – this indicated that Mr N required medium risk investments.

Findings

Having considered the evidence and the facts of the case, I am satisfied that the firm had assumed a responsibility to Mr N to take all reasonable steps to provide him with a portfolio which satisfied his stated requirements, including his agreed risk profile. In undertaking this responsibility the firm was obliged to act with reasonable skill and care.

I am satisfied that Mr N had an agreed medium risk profile at the time the firm advised him to buy the holdings in the three splits. There is no record of what was said in the conversations between the complainant and the firm before the firm's letter of 18 January 1999. However, there is no mention of a change in risk profile in the firm's letter.

I agree that it is appropriate to view the three splits as part of Mr N's overall portfolio, rather than as individual investments. The firm's terms and conditions for its advisory accounts state that the firm views a risk profile as a guide to the risk of an overall portfolio, and this is how, in line with most similar investment advice agreements and with market practice, I would normally approach the assessment of a complaint concerning a portfolio of investments.

I note the firm's point that split capital investment trusts fell within the list of 'suitable investments', in its definition of a medium risk portfolio at that time. However, I do not think the firm should have assumed that an investment was suitable for the complainant's portfolio simply because it fell within a particular class of investments. For example, I do not think it can be said that all collective investments at that time were medium risk. I would expect the firm to have looked at the individual characteristics of an investment before recommending it to a client. This process should have included a risk assessment of the investment on its own followed by a risk assessment of the profile of the whole portfolio after inclusion of the investment.

So I do not think the firm should have assumed that all investments in splits, or all constituents of particular share classes in splits, carried a similar level of risk, or that every ordinary income share was suitable for Mr N simply because he was seeking an increased level of income. As I have said elsewhere in this decision, I do not think that the risks associated with splits investments were all the same. Aside from the varying risks carried by different share classes, I think that the firm should have looked at the characteristics of each individual investment before recommending it as well as the resulting risk profile of the whole portfolio.

At the time the firm gave advice in January 1999, I consider that there would have been sufficient information available to the firm, as a sponsoring broker for splits, for the firm to have considered the following risk factors when assessing the risk of an ordinary share of a split capital investment trust:

- The risk implications of any prior ranking zeros or other share classes;
- The level of borrowings as a percentage of total assets of the trust;
- The level of holdings in other investment trusts, again as a percentage of total assets of the trust.

Ordinary shares issued by a split capital investment trust do not have a target redemption value. They also rank behind any borrowings and all other share classes, including zeros, for payment of assets on wind-up of the trust. As a result, any deficiency in assets upon wind-up of a trust will affect the ordinary shareholders first. So ordinary shares of a split capital investment trust will carry a significantly higher level of risk than the zeros.

The ordinary shares of Aberdeen Preferred Income Trust were around 48% geared, by a combination of bank debt (25%) and zeros (23%), according to the most recent available figures (the interim report of 10 October 1998 for the period to 31 August 1998). Holdings in other investment trusts were estimated as “up to 44%”, according to the prospectus of 16 July 1998.

The ordinary shares of Geared Income Investment Trust were the third-ranking shares and around 62% geared, by a combination of bank debt (8%), income shares (30%) and zeros (24%), according to the report and accounts for the period to 30 September 1998. Holdings in other investment trusts were 100%, according to the same report and accounts.

On the basis of this information, I consider that the firm should have assessed the ordinary shares of both Aberdeen Preferred Income and Geared Income as higher than medium risk at the time the firm advised Mr N to buy them in January 1999.

Regarding the income shares of St David's, I think that the firm, on the basis of its special knowledge as a sponsoring broker of splits, should have considered the asset cover of the income shares, the structural gearing produced by the prior-ranking zeros, and the levels of borrowings and holdings in other investment trusts, before recommending them (the income shares) as suitable for investment. At the end of January 1999, the income shares of St David's had an asset cover of only 79% (and 87% according to the prospectus of 16 October 1998). In addition, nearly 30% of the trust's assets (31% at 16 October 1998) was bank debt, and around 33% at 16 October 1998 was structural gearing via zeros. I therefore think that the firm should have assessed this investment as higher than medium risk, too.

The composition of Mr N's portfolio as at 16 February 1999, after the purchases in splits had been made, was as follows:

UK equities	76%
Conventional investment trusts	5.5%
Cash	1%
St David's income shares	6%
Aberdeen Preferred Income ords	6%
Geared Income Inv Trust ords	5.5%

So around 17% of the value of the portfolio was held, according to my findings, in investments that were higher than medium risk (the splits investments). Whilst I accept that a medium risk portfolio can contain some higher than medium risk investments, I think that this is an excessive amount, particularly as there were not, in my view, any lower risk investments to offset the higher risk.

It follows that I find that the firm's advice resulted in Mr N holding a portfolio of investments that was above medium risk overall, which was unsuitable for him. So I find the firm failed in its responsibilities to Mr N and that the complaint should be upheld on this basis.

I have examined the transaction history for the account, and I am satisfied that the balance of the portfolio remained more or less the same throughout 2000 and 2001. The firm bought around £15,000 Treasury stock in late 2002, but by this time many of the splits in the portfolio had lost most or all of their value.

So I find that the firm failed in its responsibilities to Mr N by establishing a portfolio which did not match his stated requirements. I consider it reasonably foreseeable that this failure would cause Mr N loss. Accordingly, my decision is that it is fair and reasonable to uphold the complaint against the firm.

SECTION 4: Approaches to redress

115. As well as formulating an approach for deciding the merits of this complaint, I have had to decide on an approach to providing fair compensation for the loss suffered in this case, which may then be appropriate for other similar cases involving this firm. I also have in mind the need for consistency across all of the cases dealt with by the Financial Ombudsman Service.

116. My power to award redress is provided for by statute in section 229(2) of FSMA. Section 229(2)(a) provides me with a wide discretion to make an award "...of such amount as the ombudsman considers fair compensation for loss or damage...". I have had regard to the firm's legal opinion as to what this section means and its implications for how I should operate. My decision on the merits of the case is made on a fair and reasonable basis, taking into account, among other things, the relevant law (DISP 3.8.1R). Similarly, in considering issues of redress, it is fair and reasonable to have regard to the relevant legal principles and other relevant factors in deciding what I consider to be fair compensation in all the circumstances of the case. But I am not limited by section 229(2) (a) to awarding what would be awarded at law. Rather, it is an award of what I consider to represent fair compensation, subject to the limits of reasonableness. This means that where I find that a consumer was misadvised, I will usually aim to place him, as nearly as possible, in the position that he would have been in had he been properly advised, subject to fairness and the overall statutory objectives of FOS. Balanced against that I recognise that it would not normally be fair to pay compensation for loss which is too remote from the firm's acts or omissions.

117. I will have found that the splits investment or the portfolio to which it belonged was unsuitable for the individual consumer. If, instead of the unsuitable splits investment or portfolio, there was a clear suitable alternative that the consumer would on the balance of probabilities have invested in, then redress should be based on that. However, in practice it is rarely the case that there was a broadly equivalent but suitable alternative under discussion at the time. So I have to decide what the return from such an investment or portfolio might have been, and to do that I have adopted certain yardsticks or benchmarks.

118. They have been, until now:

For consumers taken to have wanted a low risk investment:

1% a year above the return on ten-year par government stock held to maturity

For consumers taken to have wanted a medium risk investment and capital growth:

the FTSE350 Total Return Index

For consumers taken to have wanted a medium risk investment and income:

the FTSE350 High Yield Index

119. If I decided that the consumer's risk requirement was between medium and low, and/or the consumer wanted a balance of income and capital growth then I would normally use these proxies in equal proportions (50/50).

120. These are, of course, not the only possible yardsticks. In particular it has been suggested that the FTSE350 indices are inappropriate because they are insufficiently diversified (at sector and stock levels) and consequentially represent a higher degree of risk than “medium”. In addition it is said that the index return is in practice unachievable since it disregards the expenses of real investment.

121. The reasons that I chose these particular yardsticks are as follows.

- *Government stock* is a low risk investment. Like even a good-quality zero, if that is what the consumer thought they were getting, government stock carries the risk that the value can fluctuate with interest rates. But, unlike such a good-quality zero, government stock does not realistically carry even a low risk that the issuer will default. The difference in risk should be reflected in the reward, hence the additional 1% return.

The use of a ten year term is sufficient to allow for the fact that the portfolio was ‘ongoing’ without a specific end date. It does not imply that the expected term of the portfolio was ten years.

- *The FTSE Indices*: Instead of selecting either a little known or obscure index/benchmark or an index/benchmark used primarily within the investment industry, I have concluded that it would be more appropriate to use one of the FTSE indices with which all firms and the vast majority of investors - including unsophisticated investors - were familiar.

It has been suggested by some firms that the FTSE All Share index would be appropriate but I concluded that this index would give far too wide a representation and give some weight to company shares which would seldom – if ever – be represented in medium risk portfolios.

Most complainants and all firms would be readily familiar with the FTSE 100, FTSE 250 and FTSE 350 indices. The FTSE 350 index incorporates the companies comprising the FTSE 100 index and the FTSE 250 index. I consider that this index (FTSE 350) offers a more representative spread of investments comparable to a well diversified medium risk portfolio and includes a good proportion of what could be considered ‘blue chip’ shares.

Furthermore, historically FTSE 350 shares underpinned much of the investment undertaken by split capital investment trusts.

122. For the reasons I have given, I remain persuaded that the FTSE350 High Yield Index (where the main objective is income), and the FTSE350 Total Return Index (where the main objective is growth), are fair and reasonable benchmarks to use for redress where it is solely or predominantly splits investments, and not the whole portfolio, that are being compared with the benchmark, in cases where the portfolio should have a medium risk profile. (In ‘low to medium’ cases, a FTSE 350 index would continue to be used in conjunction with a Gilts-related benchmark, on a 50/50 basis. And if a ‘balanced’ objective between growth and income applied, the FTSE350 High Yield index and the FTSE350 Total Return index would continue to be used together, on a 50/50 basis.) Although the FTSE350 High Yield index features some sectors more than others, it seems to me to be a very well suited benchmark where income production from equity investment is required.

123. But I am now persuaded that the FTSE 350 indices will not normally be appropriate benchmarks for redress where it is the whole portfolio that is being compared with a benchmark (again, in cases where the portfolio should have a medium risk profile). This is because in such a case the splits constituents of the portfolio do not comprise the whole portfolio. So what should be the alternative benchmark in such cases?

124. The firm has suggested the use instead of the IMA (Investment Management Association) Equity and Bond Income index as a benchmark. As I understand it, this index is intended to represent a 'fund of funds' comprising funds which invest at least 80% of their assets in the UK, between 20% and 80% in UK fixed interest securities and between 20% and 80% in UK equities, with an aim of achieving a yield of 120% or more of the FTSE All Share Index.

125. Having regard to the complainant's portfolio I do not consider that a 'peer group' index like the IMA index is appropriate. As IMA states, the primary purpose of the index is to provide a benchmark for "*groups of similar funds whose performance can be fairly compared by consumers*". So in my view, this index would be more appropriate for any individual fund within that sector and not for the type of portfolio the complainant had.

126. APCIMS¹⁴ indices on the other hand are derived from a combination of popular Gilts and Equity indices which are reasonably familiar. They are not 'peer group indices' and so their performances would not be affected by very bad or very good performers within the group. In other words, the risks undertaken by individual fund managers (whether lower than average or higher than average) would not play a part here, in contrast to the IMA index.

127. So I consider that an APCIMS index would be a suitable benchmark for a medium risk, 'whole portfolio' situation, and within the APCIMS indices, I consider the most suitable one for a complainant who had an income objective would be the APCIMS Income index, while the APCIMS Growth Index and the APCIMS Balanced Index would suit those respective objectives.

Portfolio issues

128. In many cases the firm is managing a portfolio of investments, with complete discretion as to what investments are actually held, subject only to the portfolio matching a particular level of risk. In such cases, the firm has an obligation to its customer to establish and maintain a portfolio consistent with its customer's agreed risk profile.

129. The firm's advisers have provided me with legal opinions on the question of how redress should be determined in such cases¹⁵, and they have responded to my provisional decisions by saying that my provisional approach to awarding redress in such cases is wrong. I have read and considered the views expressed in these opinions and letters. Essentially it is argued that I should only find a firm at fault if the risk level of the portfolio as a whole is out of balance. However, when calculating the loss I should only consider the loss that relates to the individual investment(s) that I have identified as having caused the 'imbalance'. Whilst I agree with the first proposition, I continue to take a different view from the firm's advisers on the second, for the reasons that follow.

¹⁴ The Association of Private Client Investment Managers and Stockbrokers

¹⁵ I.e. the legal opinions referred to earlier in this decision

130. It is on the face of it fair that if liability is decided by reference to the whole portfolio, redress should be decided in that way too. So I consider the onus is firmly on those who argue the contrary to produce compelling reasons for departing from what would otherwise be a consistent approach. And such reasons would help to dispel the impression of simply wanting 'the best of both worlds'.

131. I am obliged by statute and by DISP (the rules which govern the operation of the Financial Ombudsman Service) to reach a determination on liability by reference to what is, in my opinion, fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. In considering what constitutes a fair and reasonable determination of a particular case, I am required to have regard to, amongst other things, the relevant law. When considering what constitutes appropriate compensation in a particular case, statute provides that I may award such compensation as I consider "fair". In assessing what is fair I have had regard to, amongst other things, the common law and the fundamental legal principles (including causation and remoteness) which are used by the courts to assess damage. These have provided me with helpful guidance. But neither I nor the firm's advisers have been able to find any decided court case precisely on the point which supports the proposition that redress in the case of managed portfolios should be calculated in the way the firm suggests or should not be calculated in the way that I calculate it.

132. The firm's obligation to its customer is to take all reasonable and proper steps to provide a portfolio which satisfies the customer's requirements, including his agreed risk characteristic. Aside from any more general obligation, this was in fact a stated regulatory requirement for this firm (which, at the time of the events to which this decision relates, was subject to the rules of the Securities and Futures Authority ("SFA")). In addition to there being a requirement to make individual suitable decisions, Rule 5-31(3) of the SFA's rules said:

"(3) A *firm* which acts as –

(a) an *investment manager* for a *private customer*

must ensure that the customer's portfolio or account remains suitable, having regard to the facts disclosed by that customer or other relevant facts about the customer of which the *firm* is, or reasonably should be, aware."

133. Similar requirements appear in the Financial Services Authority's rules. The rules, and the doubling up of the suitability requirement to apply to individual investments and the portfolio as a whole, reflect the reality – that the suitability of individual investments is dependent on the suitability of the portfolio as a whole.

134. The contract between the firm and the consumer is to provide a portfolio of the agreed risk level. The firm is not required to account to the consumer for its individual investment decisions in the sense that it need not obtain prior permission from the consumer for individual transactions. The firm has certain reporting requirements, to keep the consumer informed about transactions affecting the portfolio, but at any given time the consumer may not be immediately aware – and certainly has no obligation to make him or herself aware – of the content of the portfolio.

135. The consumer has given the firm discretion to invest and so usually cannot successfully complain that any single investment decision is unsuitable, other than in the context of the other decisions affecting the portfolio. A consumer may put the complaint as "xyz shares were too risky". But if I were to consider the complaint exactly as framed I would

have no way of identifying the particular shares as more or less suitable than any other holding in the portfolio. The complaint would be bound to fail.

136. A high risk investment is not automatically unsuitable for a medium risk portfolio. If the investment is small, the portfolio may remain balanced (i.e. medium risk overall) even if there is no counterbalancing low risk investment.

137. If the high risk investment is sizeable, the portfolio may be 'unbalanced' (i.e. above medium risk overall) unless there is a low risk investment that provides an adequate counterbalance.

138. But if there is no counterbalancing low risk investment, it is necessary, and sufficient, only to conclude that the portfolio overall was unbalanced and thus unsuitable. There is no clear answer to the question which of the investments in the portfolio was unsuitable: was it the high risk investment, or was it one or more of the medium or lower risk investments contained in the portfolio that might instead have been a low risk counterbalance to the high risk element?

139. I have an investigative role. Unlike the Courts, the vast majority of complainants to the Financial Ombudsman Service are unrepresented and not advised on how best to state and particularise their complaint. I am not limited to dealing with complainants' "pleadings", as a court might be. Consistently with my obligations under statute to resolve complaints fairly and with a minimum of formality I look to identify the essence of the complaint. In these cases – although few complainants would express it in quite this way – the essence of the complaint is whether the firm committed a breach of duty, which in context means whether the firm failed to keep the whole portfolio in balance. So I interpret the complaint in the best way that it can be given practical meaning – that the portfolio as a whole was out of balance. That will mean that I do not always restrict my assessment to the investment decision or decisions that the complainant has referred to in the complaint form. If I did so, I could be accused, rightly, of interfering with legitimate exercise of discretion. I would be ignoring the firm's regulatory responsibilities and its primary obligation to its customer. And the consequences for the parties could vary significantly depending on the mere chance that a complainant had worded the complaint in one way or another.

140. Nor, for the reasons I have given, is it the case that I decide that a particular investment or investments is/are solely responsible for the portfolio being out of balance. My decision is always in substance that the whole portfolio was out of balance (if such was the case). And I do not think it fair to make a general assumption that, if the firm had not recommended or used the particular splits investments but had resorted instead to other investments, the rest of the portfolio would have been identical or largely the same. The composition of the whole portfolio may well have differed significantly if the firm had not used the particular splits investments and so had been denied (for example) the particular levels of growth or income that these originally provided.

141. Where liability is judged by considering the portfolio as a whole, so, usually, should loss be. The issue I must decide is what loss the firm's breach of duty caused. The relevant breach of duty is the failure to keep the whole portfolio in balance. So it is only fair and reasonable, in my view, to compare how the whole portfolio actually performed with how it would have performed in line with a suitable benchmark, which should reasonably reflect general market and performance fluctuations.

142. So typically, I compare the actual performance of the portfolio with how it would have performed in line with a benchmark index that reflects the portfolio's agreed risk profile. The

benchmark reflects the sort of return that in my view the complainant could reasonably have expected from the portfolio from the time it became unsuitable, if the firm had not breached its duty. And I consider it a fair and common sense way of stripping general market losses out of the redress calculation, as the firm should not in principle be liable to compensate for those.

143. The choice of benchmark does not involve any use of hindsight, so there is no question of my choosing a benchmark purely (or at all) because it results in a better or worse financial outcome for either party by comparison with the actual performance of the portfolio.

144. Nor will it be the case that the medium risk benchmark, which is applied to the value of the whole portfolio, would be a suitable benchmark of performance for each constituent investment in the portfolio if taken individually, as any portfolio can legitimately contain investments of differing risk levels. So there should be no surprise if some of the investments in the portfolio performed markedly better or worse than the benchmark.

145. And since hindsight plays no part, I make no adjustments if the medium risk investments in, say, a medium risk portfolio actually under-performed the medium risk benchmark. There should be a portfolio effect even if the portfolio was unbalanced, and the factors producing the under-performance may have had compensating effects elsewhere in the portfolio.

146. In my view the general approach that I have described above is fair and reasonable for cases where the firm has complete discretion over the management of the investment portfolio. But I do not rule out adjusting this general approach if the particular circumstances of a case require it.

147. I am likely to adopt a different approach, restricting the redress methodology to a smaller range of investments within the portfolio, where for example there is a non-managed advisory relationship and the firm may not be regularly and routinely in a position to take remedial action. In such a case the constituents of the portfolio, as they change from time to time, are not necessarily the firm's choice or recommendation. Clearly this will depend on the circumstances and may vary from case to case.

Interest

148. In many cases there will have been an event causing the loss to crystallise (such as the sale of the investment). Compensation for damage caused by the firm's wrongful acts or omissions is calculated up to the date of that crystallising event. However, in addition there must be some adjustment for the time between crystallisation and payment of compensation.

149. In effect the complainant has been deprived of access to funds between crystallisation and the date of my award or later payment. Interest is due, but at what rate? I have considered the firm's legal opinions, both of which express their views as to the appropriate method of calculating interest in such cases. I set out below my approach to this issue.

150. I have a discretion to award interest by virtue of section 229(8)(a) of FSMA. However, the section does not specify the method by which interest should be calculated. I have carefully considered whether interest under section 229(8)(a) should be calculated on a simple or compound basis. I have noted the position of the Courts on this issue. Section 35A of the Supreme Court Act makes specific provision for the payment of interest on awards of damages. It provides the Courts with a number of discretions - including the rate

which may be used and the period for which interest should be payable. However, it stipulates that interest should be calculated on a simple basis. Thus, interest on damages (as opposed to interest as damage) should be calculated on a simple basis. I have adopted this approach to the calculation of interest on the post-crystallisation award.

151. Section 229(8)(a) does specifically provide me with the power to specify the rate of interest. I have carefully considered what would represent an appropriate rate under section 229(8)(a). The objective is to compensate the complainant for having been kept out of his money, rather than to seek to put him back into the position he would have been in but for the wrongful act of the firm. But it is not always straightforward to assess this. With the benefit of hindsight complainants might have wished they had put in place any number of beneficial investments. They might also claim they had to borrow funds from elsewhere to cover the shortfall in their funds pending payment of the award. But I have to guard against hindsight. In most cases the actual effect on the complainant's finances will not be ascertainable without making speculative assumptions. I need to see a clear alternative use of the money before I believe it would be right to take this into account. Nor is interest intended to penalise the firm.

152. In the absence of such clear evidence, I look to the approach of the Courts to this issue. There is no completely clear and consistent approach. There are different rates applicable in different circumstances. The rate applicable under the Judgments Act 1838 as interest on Court judgments after judgment is currently 8% simple and has not changed since 1993. This rate is sometimes used to calculate interest on post-crystallisation damage, but perhaps more commonly now, certainly in the Commercial Courts, base rate plus 1% is used (as a simple rate). The rationale appears to be that this is intended to represent a commercial borrowing rate. However, the borrowing rates available to consumers are typically higher than for commercial customers. And the tax treatment is likely to differ – with a consumer, unlike a commercial customer, being unable to treat interest paid on borrowing as an allowable expense for tax purposes.

153. In their Consultation Paper on Compound Interest, the Law Commission sought to address some of these issues. It proposed that there should be a single rate, applicable in all cases. The rate proposed there (which it was proposed would apply to compound and simple calculations), was to be the commercial rate, set by reference to bank base rates. In the absence of persuasive evidence to the contrary, a consistent rate has real attractions for me. The rate is intended to achieve the same purpose - namely to compensate the complainant for having been out of his money. Firms would be subject to additional uncertainty if they did not know the rate which was to be used. This might prove detrimental to attempts to resolve the dispute at the earliest possible stage, consistent with the statutory objectives of the Financial Ombudsman Service pursuant to section 225 of FSMA.

154. So, unless there is a clear alternative use of (or cost of) the money in the individual case, I am likely to award interest at 8% a year simple – from which the law requires the firm to deduct lower-rate tax and on which some consumers may have to pay higher rate tax also. In the absence of particular circumstances in any specific case which might suggest that it was fair to act otherwise, I consider this approach to represent a fair and reasonable starting point and to have the advantages of consistency, predictability and arithmetical simplicity.

155. The use of a fixed simple rate has obvious advantages in making it easier to apply in a calculation – and easier for the complainant to check. A compound variable rate cannot be

checked without access to the historical record of rates from time to time, and requires a degree of mathematical ability.

156. It also means that the calculation is not made yet more complex by having to distinguish between interest on the loss between crystallisation and decision, and interest on delayed payment after decision. Whatever the rate for the former, the rate for the latter would be likely to remain at 8% simple, in line with the judgment debt rate.

SECTION 5: Specific redress

In assessing what would be fair compensation, I consider that my aim should be to put the complainant in the position he would have been in if he had not been inappropriately advised by the firm. I must next consider what loss was caused to Mr N by the firm's failures and what would amount to fair compensation. If the firm had fulfilled its responsibilities to Mr N properly, I am satisfied that it would instead have recommended investments which resulted in Mr N holding a medium risk portfolio from the outset, with an income objective. In calculating Mr N's actual loss, I aim to put him into the position he should have been in but for the firm's failures.

Because the portfolio was held on a non-managed advisory basis for most of the period concerned, I think that, exceptionally, redress should be calculated only by reference to the investments in the portfolio that were above medium risk – the three split capital trust investments. I have explained earlier in this decision how I would normally calculate redress by reference to the whole portfolio of investments. But I also explained why, in non-managed advisory cases like this one, I might differ from that approach. I acknowledge that the portfolio became discretionary from August 2001, but by this time some of the holdings had already lost significant value. So I do not think that it would be appropriate, in the circumstances of this case, to apply the redress calculation to the entire value of the portfolio at any point.

I think it is reasonable to assume that, had Mr N not invested in the three splits in question, he would have been recommended alternative investments that matched his medium risk profile and income objective. Any views an investor may have now about what investment he would have made in the past could be coloured by hindsight about how alternative investments have actually performed. In the absence of compelling evidence dating from the time when the investment was made, I have considered what yardstick to use.

I consider that the fair and appropriate yardstick would be a comparison between:

- The sum of (a) the capital value and (b) the income yield that the complainant would have received had the value of his original three investments performed in line with the FTSE350 High Yield Index between 11 February 1999 to date;
- The sum of (a) the current value of Mr N's investments in splits, if any, and (b) the income payments he received from the investments.

Although the comparison may not be an exact one, I consider that it is sufficiently close to assist me in putting Mr N into the position he would have been in had he not received inappropriate advice from the firm.

My calculations are as follows:

- Mr N originally invested a total of £47,960 in the three splits on 11 February 1999.
- Had this performed in line with the FTSE350 High Yield Index, the sum of the capital value and income yield received between the date of investment and now would have been £93,355.

- The investments no longer have any value.
- Mr N received £13,805 in income payments from the investments. This should be deducted from the above figure.
- So I consider that the total loss suffered by Mr N on his three investments to date is £79,550.

I therefore order the firm to pay Mr N £79,550. Should any dispute or query arise about my calculation before this redress is paid or accepted, it should be referred to me for resolution.

If the redress is not paid within 28 days of the complainant's acceptance of my decision, the firm is also to pay him interest on the sum unpaid at 8% per annum simple, from the date of this decision to the date of payment.

Roger Yeomans
Ombudsman