

The complaint

Mr G complains that he's been unable to access online banking for his new account with HSBC UK Bank Plc.

What happened

In early September 2019, Mr G opened a new student account with HSBC. He tried to register for online banking, and found out that HSBC would have to send him a secure key to complete the setup. He asked HSBC for that key. He then emailed HSBC a number of times, first to say he hadn't received the key, then to say not only had he still not received the key, but HSBC hadn't acknowledged his emails about this.

HSBC finally responded in late November. It said it was having a problem with issuing the secure keys for some customers, and Mr G's case had now been raised with the IT team. But HSBC said that this should have been raised with IT much sooner, and it was sorry about that. It paid Mr G £200 in compensation. And it said it would be in touch as soon as its IT team had investigated.

Mr G responded in early December. He was unhappy with the service he'd received, and felt HSBC had been very unprofessional. He didn't want only to be offered compensation, with the issue still not sorted out. Mr G said he was disabled, and had difficulty visiting a branch. A few days later he wrote again to say he was still unhappy not to have online banking for some months.

On the same day, HSBC told Mr G it had reopened his complaint. It then wrote again, to say that it thought the compensation was fair for what had happened. It hadn't previously been aware of his disability, but it had suggested some other ways to bank as an alternative whilst Mr G was waiting for this issue to be resolved, including telephone banking.

Early in January 2020 Mr G wrote again to ask why the issue was still not solved. And he said he hadn't received a telephone banking code either.

Internal notes made by HSBC on 23 January say that Mr G's online banking profile hadn't yet been fixed by HSBC's IT team. It was accidentally missed from the last batch. HSBC emailed Mr G on 24 January, to say sorry that this was taking longer. HSBC said then that it would review the compensation to Mr G once the issue was fixed.

On 24 January HSBC wrote to Mr G again. It said his telephone banking code was ordered on 27 December. It could take up to 7 days for Mr G to receive this phone banking code, it was sorry if he wasn't given this timescale. (Internal notes show this was sent on 31 January.) HSBC also said Mr G's complaint about online banking had been escalated, and it would be in touch once that was resolved.

HSBC emailed Mr G on 29 January to say that as long as he has a telephone banking number, he will be able to register for online banking. The person who emailed Mr G asked him to let her know once he'd successfully registered.

HSBC said Mr G's registration for online banking was completed on 30 January, but he hadn't accessed online banking since then. It has also sent us emails that show what Mr G had managed to do on 30 January was get to the stage where his secure code should've been posted to him. It was unclear whether the process of allowing Mr G to access online banking had finally been completed.

Our investigator didn't think this complaint should be upheld. He said that Mr G told us on 10 March that he hadn't been able to access online banking, but a screenshot from HSBC showed he'd registered on 30 January. Our investigator had emailed Mr G on 9 April to confirm if he had access, but Mr G hadn't replied.

Our investigator thought that HSBC had awarded a fair amount of compensation for what had gone wrong, and it had resolved Mr G's concerns, albeit with delays.

Mr G didn't think it was reasonable for HSBC not to let him access his new bank account for six months, and £200 in compensation wasn't fair. He'd explained to HSBC that he was disabled and couldn't easily go to a high street branch. He said HSBC had a blasé attitude. He wanted his case to be considered by an ombudsman.

Our investigator said Mr G hadn't confirmed when he'd got access to online banking, and Mr G replied to say he still hadn't. Mr G thought it was irresponsible for HSBC to have assumed everything was fine from a screenshot, without contacting him. He hadn't got access, as HSBC had again not bothered to send out the secure key. He said he'd lost interest, as it had all become so stressful. He was relying on friends to use cashpoints to get ministatements.

He said he was considering changing banks. And he felt it was excessive to use both codes and secure keys to access online banking.

Our investigator raised this with HSBC, and it said Mr G's secure key was sent to him on 30 January 2020. Mr G hadn't tried to access online banking since then. It had recently reissued the key to him.

Our investigator didn't change his mind. He said HSBC had sent Mr G the letter he needed in January, but Mr G hadn't activated his online banking then. He'd also been sent this letter in December, but hadn't activated the account then either (although it seems likely that what was sent in December was a telephone banking code, not the secure banking code which is the final stage needed to access online banking). Our investigator said Mr G was using his account, and HSBC had sent Mr G the necessary letters, so he didn't think HSBC had to pay more compensation.

Mr G said he'd never received a secure code in a letter. He'd used cash machines with help from a carer, but hadn't been able to access online banking. He said we were believing HSBC over him.

Our investigator said that he could only check if HSBC had sent letters. There may have been problems with the post, but HSBC would send the letter again. Mr G thought HSBC should find out why he didn't get the letter. Our investigator said we wouldn't expect that. Mr G wanted his case to be considered by an ombudsman, so the case was passed to me for a final decision.

What I've decided – and why

I've considered all the available evidence and arguments to decide what's fair and

reasonable in the circumstances of this complaint.

My provisional decision

I issued a provisional decision on this complaint and explained why I did propose to uphold it. This is what I said then:

Mr G raised his complaint relatively promptly once he found he couldn't access online banking. But HSBC then took about two months to respond to this. During that time, Mr G had no access to online banking. HSBC paid Mr G £200 for this. I think that was a fair resolution to Mr G's complaint up until this point.

After this, HSBC was made aware that Mr G was disabled, and wouldn't easily be able to use some of the alternatives such as banking in branch. But unfortunately, when HSBC repaired a batch of customer profiles to make sure its customers could use online banking, it missed Mr G's profile out. That caused a further delay in Mr G being able to access online banking. I think that was a serious mistake. By now, HSBC was aware of Mr G's disability, and that he would be more affected than most by not being able to access online banking.

HSBC said to Mr G that it would review his compensation once it had finally fixed his profile, so it could see how much longer he'd had to wait. It hasn't done that.

Mr G's online profile was repaired in late January. He tried to register online then, and again had to wait for a secure key to be sent out. HSBC says that was sent on 30 January. Mr G says he didn't receive this, but he doesn't seem to have contacted HSBC again to ask for this. He said he lost interest in this, because it had become so difficult.

I don't think it's HSBC's fault that Mr G hasn't been able to access online banking after 30 January. I'm satisfied it has issued the code Mr G needs. And I've not seen anything to suggest to me that it would be HSBC's fault if Mr G hasn't received that. I don't think HSBC had to get in touch with Mr G again then to check the code was received and all was well.

But I do think HSBC caused the delay up to 30 January 2020. Without the second mistake HSBC made, in not fixing Mr G's profile when it fixed others, Mr G would've been able to access online banking much earlier than this. I think HSBC was right to suggest that it should've reviewed the compensation it had paid to Mr G at this point. I think it should've done that, and I think it should pay £250 now for this additional delay.

I think that would provide a fair and reasonable outcome to this complaint.

I invited the parties to make any final points, if they wanted, before issuing my final decision. Both sides replied.

Putting things right

HSBC asked whether I wanted it to pay £250 on top of the £200 it had already paid. I have confirmed it was £250 in addition to the £200 already paid.

Mr G replied to say he didn't think this was enough compensation, because he still didn't have online access to the account. He said the amount I'd suggested was barely enough to cover the inconvenience and stress that this bank account had caused over the last 12 months.

Mr G said he still couldn't access online banking. HSBC hadn't contacted him to make sure he could log in, which he didn't think was good customer service. And, as a disabled person, he didn't expect to be disregarded. He didn't have the freedom to visit his branch as other people do, and he has to rely on others to assist him with any banking requests.

The compensation I proposed was for Mr G not being able to access online banking up to 30 January. I said in my provisional decision that I didn't think it was HSBC's fault if Mr G hadn't been able to access online banking after 30 January. I thought HSBC had sent the code Mr G needed.

I understand from what Mr G says now that he still hasn't been able to log in, but he hasn't said why, or suggested he's been back to HSBC again to tell it this. And I'd said in my provisional decision that I didn't think HSBC had to proactively get in touch with Mr G again to check the code was received and all was well. I don't think that HSBC not doing this means it's disregarding him.

I've reviewed this decision, and I still think that the award I proposed provides a fair and reasonable outcome to this complaint.

My final decision

My final decision is that HSBC Bank UK Plc must pay Mr G £250.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr G to accept or reject my decision before 16 September 2020.

Esther Absalom-Gough
Ombudsman