

The complaint

Mrs B complains that Barclays Bank UK PLC (“Barclays”) changed the name registered to her bank account without her permission and have caused her distress and inconvenience.

What happened

Mrs B holds an account with Barclays. She was unfortunately diagnosed with a health condition in 2017, which led to her being unable to afford her repayments. She asked Barclays if they would consider writing off her debt due to her illness, to which they requested medical evidence in order to carry out an assessment.

Mrs B disclosed her medical records, but the surname on the documentation was under her previous married name and did not match the name her account was registered under. As a result, Barclays said they were unable to accept the medical evidence. They asked if she could either send in medical evidence under the same name or, alternatively, they could look to change the name on her account to match the medical records if she sent in her marriage certificate.

Mrs B sent a copy of her marriage certificate on 11 September 2019. But she was upset to find that they had registered her married name to her account (for which she was going through a divorce at the time) without any discussion or approval. Mrs B was also upset that this name would also be added to her credit file and that this could have an impact on her financially. Mrs B says that the stress of the incident caused her to have an attack of her medical condition, for which she is seeking compensation.

Our investigator upheld the complaint. He thought Barclays could have made it clearer that they would be permanently changing the name on her account upon receipt of her marriage certificate, but he did acknowledge that they had suggested this as an option before Mrs B sent the documentation. The investigator recommended an award of £150 compensation in recognition of the distress and inconvenience caused. Barclays said they would accept this recommendation, but Mrs B disagreed as she said it did not recognise the fact that they had caused her health to decline. As a result, the matter has been escalated to me to determine.

What I’ve decided – and why

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

Having done so, I agree with the conclusions reached by the investigator. I’ll explain why.

Barclays say they were unable to accept the medical records provided by Mrs B because they did not match her surname. I don’t think this was an unreasonable stance to take, particularly when it was evidence the bank required in order to properly assess her situation. And I can see that Barclays did explain this to Mrs B in their letter of 6 September 2019.

In the same letter, Barclays also presented further options, including that of changing the name on her account to match that of her medical records – so long as she had documentation showing that this was her married name:

“As I’m unaware of the circumstances around your surname changing, I’ve detailed below the documentary evidence we require in order to update this on your account depending on the reason it’s changed...”

Marriage or civil partnership registration document and cover letter confirming exact change”.

Mrs B subsequently provided her marriage certificate, which led to Barclays proceeding with the name change. I appreciate why the bank went ahead with this without any further discussion with Mrs B, as they were under the impression that her sending in the marriage certificate was to be taken as her approval to proceed with the name change on the account. However, Mrs B said she was not expecting them to carry out the name change without further discussion or approval from her, so I can also understand why it came as a surprise and was upsetting to her given that she was going through a divorce.

In the circumstances, I agree with the investigator before me that Barclays ultimately could have done more to have made it clear that they would carry out the name change instantly upon receipt of Mrs B’s marriage certificate. The investigator recommended compensation of £150 for the distress and inconvenience caused, which Barclays have accepted. However, Mrs B does not think this amount is fair because she says her experience with Barclays caused an attack of her diagnosed medical condition and a decline in her wellbeing.

I’m very sorry to hear of the ill health Mrs B had been suffering, and I appreciate this must have been a difficult and upsetting time for her. She has sent medical evidence to show that she is in fact suffering from the medical conditions she has described, as well as a statement from her ex-husband. But I have seen no independent medical evidence to suggest that her decline in health was ultimately a direct result of any interaction with Barclays, so I do not think it would be fair and reasonable to award the significant amount of compensation sought by Mrs B. I do acknowledge, however, that their actions likely exacerbated her condition, and that this could have been avoided if they had sought her approval to change the name on the account. And I consider £150 to be fair compensation in the circumstances.

Mrs B says she is also unhappy because Barclays have made reports to credit referencing agencies with her married surname, which she says could impact her financially. But Barclays are under an obligation to report accurate information to the credit referencing agencies. So although her debt was subsequently written off, it had to be done in her married name to match the medical records upon which the decision was based. And in any event, I’ve seen no evidence to suggest that such a report has had any adverse financial consequences on Mrs B.

My final decision

For the reasons given above, I uphold this complaint and direct Barclays Bank UK PLC to pay £150 compensation in recognition of the distress and inconvenience caused to Mrs B.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I’m required to ask Mrs B to accept or reject my decision before 2 November 2020.

Jack Ferris

Ombudsman