

The complaint

Miss R complains about National Savings and Investments (NSI)'s processes.

What happened

Miss R had some premium bonds which were bought for her by her father when she was under 16. She was now older and wanted to establish an online account with NSI in her own name – so she could invest on her own. But she was told by NSI that to register for online services, she needed to complete a registration form – which needed to be signed and witnessed by someone who was not a member of her family.

Miss R is represented by her father, but I will refer to Miss R in the decision, as she is the complainant here. She complained that it was unreasonable for NSI to ask for a signature of a witness – as this was a risk under the COVID-19 measures. She suggested that NSI align their records with the Post Office and DVLA – which would mean they didn't need to ask for a witness signature. She also said she'd spent over 30 minutes on the phone when calling NSI.

NSI said they advised customers in Miss R's situation to send the registration form without the witnessed signature. They said their security procedures were of the highest importance but noted Miss R's suggestion about using the Post Office and DVLA. NSI apologised for the long wait times that Miss R experienced – this was due to the pandemic, which meant they were operating with smaller teams which affected their normal timescales.

Miss R brought her complaint to us. Our investigator said NSI had dealt with her complaint reasonably. She said that it wasn't our role to ask a business to change its processes.

Miss R asked that an ombudsman look at her complaint. She said that she looked at the NSI's website at the time of NSI's final response – and it said a witnessed signature was still required. She said that the pandemic couldn't be used as an excuse for the long wait times on the phone.

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.

The crux of Miss R's complaint is that in January 2021 - she was asked by NSI to complete a registration form to access their online services – but this had to be signed by a third party witness (and not a member of her family). She said that this wasn't a reasonable thing to ask in the light of the social distancing restrictions in place. She said that the wait times on the phone were too long. And she suggested that it would be sensible for NSI to use signatures from the Post Office or DVLA – if NSI did that, then such a process wouldn't be needed.

Our investigator is right – we can't ask businesses to change their processes. But our role is to ensure that customers are treated reasonably and fairly in the circumstances of their complaint. And so - I've considered Miss R's complaint in the light of this.

The issue here is that NSI had processes in place which meant Miss R needed to complete a registration form and have it witnessed by a third party. On the one hand, NSI say that their process was necessary – to ensure the security of their business, and to protect customers. On the other hand, Miss R argues that it wasn't a reasonable thing to ask – because of the social distancing requirements of the pandemic.

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) made several announcements during the pandemic – which covered how they expected businesses like NSI to act. And – the FCA said that while online services were to be encouraged, firms (such as NSI) should continue to be vigilant about security breaches. The FCA were concerned there would be more fraud and scams. In other words, the FCA expected firms to continue to maintain their standards of security – rather than relax them. And so, in the light of this guidance, I don't think we could say that NSI acted unreasonably in continuing to ask for a witness's signature to the registration document.

In NSI's final response – they said they would accept a document which wasn't witnessed. But Miss R then said to us – and showed us evidence - that NSI's website wasn't changed to say that. We asked NSI about that – and they said that this wasn't a general change they made – but it was something they offered to some customers if they raised concerns – as Miss R had. I think that shows that NSI are willing to be flexible in certain circumstances, but that doesn't mean that they have to make wider changes to their processes and systems. That would be something for NSI to decide.

The FCA also said they encouraged customers to use online services. And because of the pandemic, there was a large increase in calls to financial firms. Unfortunately, this took place at the same time as many staff were sick and off work – or working from home. And businesses needed to adjust how they provide telephone services as a result. It was unfortunate that this led to long waiting times for customers of many businesses – including NSI. I can accept that by the time Miss R called NSI – in January 2021 – that she might have expected things to be sorted out, but NSI have said they were still experiencing difficulties. I accept that Miss R was frustrated by this, but NSI have explained why customers had to wait longer and it's a reasonable explanation. So I don't think it'd be fair for me to say that they need to do any more in this respect.

I've then considered Miss R's suggestion of using the signatures held by the Post Office and DVLA. NSI has explained that they don't do this as part of their process or systems. That's a decision they're entitled to make as a business and not one this service can make them change. NSI has explained that it has noted Miss R's suggestion and that is as much as I'd expect it to do here.

I appreciate that Miss R's experience was frustrating for her – but I don't think NSI acted unreasonably and therefore I don't uphold her complaint.

(continued)

My final decision

I do not uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Miss R to accept or reject my decision before 23 March 2022.

Martin Lord
Ombudsman