

## **The complaint**

Mrs M and Mr M complain about their online experience with National Savings and Investments (NSI).

## **What happened**

Mr M held a Power of Attorney (POA) on his mother's (Mrs M) account. Mrs M had a savings account with NSI, and Mr M also had a savings account and premium savings bonds with NSI in his own name. While there are two account holders involved here, Mr M has brought the complaint to us in respect of both, and for simplicity I will refer to the complainant as Mr M.

On 30 November 2020, Mr M tried to log onto both his account and Mrs M's savings account to make withdrawals and transfers from them. Mr M logged on at 10.36am and made a transfer of £6,099 to his premium savings bond account. At 11.36am, he closed the savings account with a transfer of £21.25 to his bank account. Mr M then logged onto Mrs M's account and at 11.47am closed her account with a transfer of £20,047.67 to his bank account.

Mr M complained. He said the overall experience was very poor. Firstly, he had to wait for at least half an hour to log on before he could view the accounts. Then, he had to re-enter a nominated bank account again on both his and his mother's account – even though this shouldn't have been needed because they'd been entered when the accounts were opened. There weren't clear instructions as to how to close the accounts – as the system asked that a balance of £1 was left in place. He had to call NSI to complete the transfer on Mrs M's account – and the wait time to get through was half an hour. The online chat wasn't available. Overall, he felt that the NSI savings account were neither 'easy access' nor 'no notice' (as they were advertised) given the time he had to take to complete the transactions.

NSI said that a nominated bank account had to be added to the NSI account set up on its website, and this had been done when Mr M phoned NSI. It wasn't possible to close savings account by transfer into premium bonds, as premium bonds could only be purchased in whole pounds. They apologised for the wait times on the phone – this was due to increased customer calls, and the impact of the pandemic on staffing levels. The webchat service hadn't always been available – this wasn't related to the pandemic, and they were taking steps to put that right.

Mr M said that NSI's final response didn't answer his complaint. NSI then said that customers needed to enter the full balance to close an account and the interest to close could then be added. NSI said that from start to finish, Mr M's online experience took an hour.

Mr M brought his complaint to us. Our investigator said NSI acted reasonably. She said that Mr M's online experience to close two accounts and make a transfer to his premium bonds account – lasted just over an hour. It was inconvenient for Mr M to have had to call NSI. It wasn't clear why Mr M had to re-enter the nominated account details again. It was

inconvenient for him to have had to wait to get through to NSI on the phone – which was due to the pandemic. She felt that NSI's apology was sufficient as a response to Mr M's complaint.

Mr M didn't agree. He also said that NSI didn't respond to him within the eight-week timeframe they were allowed and wanted this adding to his complaint. He repeated that he had to wait a long time on the phone, and the whole experience lasted all morning. And NSI's system had 'forgotten' the nominated bank accounts – and there still wasn't an explanation for this. He asked that an ombudsman look at his complaint.

*I reached a provisional decision where I said:*

Online banking is an important part of our lives now – and we expect it to go well. When it doesn't, it can be frustrating – and so I can appreciate where Mr M is coming from. He says he felt 'cut off' from his and his mother's savings by what happened. He doesn't think that an apology is good enough – and I agree with him. I say this because taken as a whole – the various aspects of what happened added up to a lot of inconvenience.

For me, the key point is that he had to add a nominated account for both his account and that of Mrs M. He says he had done this at account opening and therefore it shouldn't have been needed again. NSI didn't answer why that was in their final responses to Mr M. Mr M had to ask NSI again, and so, separately, did we. And in all honesty – we didn't get a clear answer either. NSI say that this could be corrected by a 'few clicks' but in Mr M's case, he felt he had to call NSI to resolve it – which was a reasonable thing to do.

And when he called, he had at least a half hour wait to get through. I accept that NSI were affected by the pandemic and this caused the long wait time – but it was still inconvenient for Mr M.

And he couldn't use the webchat service either – NSI admit that this wasn't working well on a regular basis, so it appears it simply wasn't available when Mr M needed it. So – he couldn't get help that way. And so – he had to call NSI.

Mr M also says he had to wait half an hour in the queue to log in online. We don't have any information on the availability of NSI's website on the day and time in question – and without that, I'm persuaded that Mr M's version of what happened is correct and I accept he had to wait to log in.

Mr M also says that the website messages about how to close accounts weren't clear – but NSI answered his points here – saying that he needed to enter the full balance and then account closure was possible. So, I think that was a reasonable response from NSI in that respect.

Mr M also added a complaint that NSI didn't provide their response within in the eight-week timescale which the Financial Conduct Authority has set down. I can see this was a frustration for Mr M, but in fact this isn't an aspect of his complaint we can look at. This is because this service is governed by strict rules about what complaints we can, and cannot, look at. These are covered in The Financial Conduct Authority's Handbook. This defines a complaint as being about a financial product or service. So, complaints specifically about a business's complaint handling or processes aren't included. So – I must set that to one side here.

I can see that in conversation with NSI, Mr M asked for compensation of £100, but NSI declined to pay that. But looking at the cumulative effect of what happened and his overall experience – I'm persuaded that a compensation payment of £100 for distress and

inconvenience is warranted here. On balance, Mr W probably did have to wait half an hour to log on and had a further wait time of half an hour on the phone. And – he couldn't use the online chat to sort things out. And – it's still not clear why he had to add a nominated bank account to the two savings bank profiles he was accessing.

Responses to the provisional decision:

Mr M (for Mrs M and Mr M) made the point that NSI's website was set up to maintain a balance of £1, thereby keeping the account open. But he accepted my findings.

NSI also accepted my findings.

I now need to make 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.

As both Mr M and NSI accepted my findings, I won't be departing from the provisional decision. And so – NSI must do what I set out.

**My final decision**

I uphold this complaint. National Savings and Investments must:

- Pay Mrs M and Mr M compensation of £100 for distress and inconvenience.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mrs M and Mr M to accept or reject my decision before 2 June 2022.

Martin Lord  
**Ombudsman**