

The complaint

Mr S is unhappy National Westminster Bank PLC (NatWest) declined to process a £300,000 payment until he visited a second branch with a different form of identification.

What happened

The details of this complaint are well known to both parties, so I won't repeat them again here. The key facts are not in dispute, so I'll focus on giving my reasons for my 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.

Having done so, I agree with the conclusions reached by the investigator for these reasons:

- Banks and building societies have an obligation to try and keep their customers' accounts safe and prevent fraudulent transactions. They have developed sophisticated systems and procedures to help them do so. Sometimes they block legitimate payments that a customer wants to take place. They can also ask customers to provide additional documentation if they remain concerned. This can cause distress and inconvenience to a customer – but it doesn't necessarily mean they've acted incorrectly. Their terms and conditions also allow for security procedures of this nature to take place.
- I understand the reasons Mr S was frustrated he couldn't make the payment when he visited the first branch. He'd gone out of his way to complete the visit and was happy the transaction was genuine. He's also explained that due to his career, he has a good understanding of the financial industry and therefore doesn't think he'd fall victim to a scam. The second branch also processed the transaction after he provided his passport instead of his driving licence.
- However, I wouldn't expect a bank to treat their customers differently based on their careers. As mentioned above, they take protecting their customers' accounts and money very seriously. Due to the size of the transaction, the potential loss to Mr S would have been significant had it not been genuine. So, I think it was reasonable for the first branch to be cautious and ask questions to try and protect Mr S's account.
- NatWest have explained that when the first branch staff carried out their security checks, based on the details Mr S gave them, the name of the business receiving the money and their own research, they weren't prepared to complete the transaction unless further information was provided. Specifically, they wanted to see additional evidence he was sending the money to a genuine investment company. I understand why Mr S believes the branch staff were overzealous, this is especially because a different branch agreed to complete the transaction later the same day. However, as their decision was ultimately made to protect Mr S, and the money in his account, I don't think they acted unreasonably by requesting further information. I've also seen

no evidence which suggest this decision was based on anything other than genuine security concerns.

- That said, the DVLA's website explains that any driving licence that expired between 1 February and 31 December 2020 were automatically extended for 11 months from the expiry date. It's my understanding that Mr S's licence expired during that timeframe. So, while I note the branch manager followed company guidance and said she couldn't accept the licence as a valid form of identification. I don't think she should reasonably have done so on the basis that it had expired.
- As NatWest have now offered to pay Mr S £100 compensation for the distress and inconvenience this matter caused him, I think this is a fair resolution to the complaint. I know Mr S feels strongly that this isn't good enough. However, having carefully considered everything that's happened, and the timeframe involved, I see no reasonable grounds for directing NatWest to do anything more. I don't agree that a personal apology would be appropriate from the branch staff, and our service doesn't punish or regulate banks either. As Mr S was able to make the payment later the same day, this also suggests he didn't experience a financial loss.
- Lastly, Mr S has said he's unhappy the staff in the first branch threatened to call the police. Based on the camera footage he's provided, I don't think this was unreasonable as while the conversation was tense on both sides, it suggests he was asked to leave on a few occasions and didn't do so. I also wouldn't reasonably expect branch staff to continue a conversation once it is no longer productive.

My final decision

National Westminster Bank Plc have offered Mr S £100 compensation to resolve this complaint. I think this amount is fair and reasonable. So, I direct them to pay Mr S £100 compensation – if they haven't already done so.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr S to accept or reject my decision before 16 June 2022.

Claire Greene
Ombudsman