

The complaint

Miss B complains that in 2012, Options UK Personal Pensions LLP ('Options', trading as Carey Pensions UK LLP at the relevant time) didn't carry out adequate due diligence when it accepted her Self-Invested Personal Pension ('SIPP') application and allowed her to invest in Store First Limited ('Store First') and GAS Verdant Australian Farmland ('GAS Verdant') investments. And that she has suffered a loss as a result of this.

What happened

I've outlined the key parties involved in Miss B's complaint below.

Options

Options is a SIPP provider and administrator. At the time of these events, Options was regulated by the Financial Services Authority ('FSA'), later becoming the Financial Conduct Authority ('FCA'). Options was authorised in relation to SIPPs, to arrange (bring about) deals in investments, to deal in investments as principal, to establish, operate or wind-up a pension scheme, and to make arrangements with a view to transactions in investments.

Douglas Baillie Ltd/The Pension Specialist

The Pension Specialist ('TPS') was an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd from 24 May 2011 to 13 November 2013. At the time of TPS's involvement, Douglas Baillie Ltd was an FCA regulated financial adviser.

In October 2013 Douglas Baillie Ltd suspended its pension switching business 'The Pension Specialist', following the FCAs concerns about the standard of the advice it was giving.

In 2016 Douglas Baillie Ltd went into Financial Services Compensation Scheme ('FSCS') default.

For ease, I'll now refer to all actions of TPS as being that of Douglas Baillie Ltd, except where I'm referencing a direct quotation or where I think it's appropriate to differentiate. Based on the available evidence, I've set out below a summary of what I consider to be the key events during the relationship between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd:

- 20 October 2011 - An Introducer Profile and an Introducer Agreement between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd was signed. This set out Options' terms of business and the conduct it expected of Douglas Baillie Ltd.
- 12 December 2011 – Options received its first client from Douglas Baillie Ltd.
- 12 March 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms Hallett at Options to say, *"As you may be aware, we have started sending some transfer cases to your company."* The email outlined a query on one of these cases and asked exactly how Options' process works. In particular, Douglas Baillie Ltd asked, *"I spoke to one of your colleagues last week to*

find out what we need to send to you along with the applications. She advised your need to see a copy of our advice letter and any TVAS. Please confirm this is the case.”

- 16 March 2012 – Ms Hallett at Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to detail that her understanding of the agreed process was that:

“The Pensions Specialists (TPS) are providing full advice on transfer of occupational pension schemes to a SIPP (with us), and will provide us copies of TVAS and advice letter.

The Pensions Specialists are appointed as advisers for the purpose of the transfer of existing occupational arrangements and the establishment of the SIPP for which they will be paid from the transfer fund. TPS will get the adviser page of our application form completed and signed by each client.

We will on receipt of the SIPP application log TPS as adviser for the purposes of the transfer and SIPP establishment and keep TPS informed of progress of the transfer and copy them in on correspondence to the client including the welcome letter.

On receipt of the transfer of funds we will advise TPS as well as client

TPS will invoice the scheme for the transfer advice which we will pay

On receipt of the completion of the transaction TPS will send us a letter resigning as adviser which we will record on our systems.”

- 18 May 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms Hallett at Options to say *“Thank you for taking the time out to see [TPS Director] & Co earlier today. [TPS Director] mentioned that there were a couple of accounts that you have refused business from, as I tend to be closer to the accounts, can you confirm who they are please. This way, I can ensure that [TPS office] are aware of any blacklisted firms and that we can avoid them as well.”*
- 4 September 2012 – Ms Hallett at Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say *“We are currently considering our position going forward with regard to receiving business that is advised on transfer but not on-going and for investments and we may not continue with this line of business, however, it would be helpful for me to understand where you are currently getting the introductions from for the transfer work can you please provide me a list of introducers that you are currently doing transfer advice for to assist me to consider further.”*
- 18 – 20 September 2012 – Ms Hallett and Douglas Baillie Ltd exchanged emails about a number of recent applications involving transfers from defined benefit occupational pension schemes. Ms Hallett explained that Options would no longer accept these where the advice was against transfer. Douglas Baillie Ltd asked Ms Hallett to *“please reconsider this stance and give us the opportunity to complete the cases that until today we had no reason to believe that you would not accept”*. Ms Hallett agreed to accept several further applications.
- 4 October 2012 – Options accepted its last client from Douglas Baillie Ltd.
- 4 October 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms Hallett at Options to say, *“We are changing our process slightly so that we are advised (where possible) in advance of a SIPP transfer being made, the expected investment that is going to be made.*

Whilst we don't intend to comment on this investment, our intention is to ensure that the selected SIPP provider will allow this in advance of the SIPP application being made.

Can you provide me with a list of alternative investments that you are currently allowing?

I am also hoping that we can convert some of our other introducers who don't currently use you to do so by us taking control of where the SIPP should be placed."

- 6 October 2012 - Ms Hallett at Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say, "This is welcomed attached is a list of alternatives we have accepted.

Another point however, we need to know on the form who the introducer of the business is to you, I advised you that we had de-listed CLP and would not deal with them but we have some information from a member of your team who said in passing to a member of my team when we were asking about the investments they wanted to transact, that they would check with CLP. If you are sending us business that has been introduced by CLP please stop, we do not want to be associated with them as an introducing firm of business to us as we as I [sic] have said to you before that they offer incentives to the client for transacting the transfer and I understood that you too had concerns, is there any reason why you are still transacting business with them."

- 8 October 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms Hallett at Options to say, "Thank you for the list, this will assist us going forward.

Like your own decision, we have also decided to stop accepting new business from CLP and are only processing cases that are already in the pipeline.

As far as I am aware, we have not sent you any new cases other than the pipeline cases that were agreed when your original decision was made.

Unfortunately due to the timescales involved in our process, the pipeline has taken some time to run down.

I have two clients on my desk who have requested to transfer benefits into their existing [Options] SIPPs. These are [client name] and [client name]. Are you willing to accept these or not? We may or may not receive further requests from existing clients of yours to proceed with incremental transfers.

I will ensure that no further CLP pipeline cases come your way.

For your own information, we also took the step of writing to all CLP clients that were processed prior to your decision, asking them to confirm if they had been offered any form of incentive. We received no responses confirming this.

Since then we added a disclaimer in our process and have now added a letter that each client must sign confirming that no incentives have been offered. This covers all new cases and not just any pipeline CLP cases.

More than happy to provide you with the name of the introducing firm with each new application form as hopefully by working together on this we can eliminate any rogue introducers."

- 5 February 2013 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Options to say "Following the recent FSA alert regarding unregulated investments into SIPP's, we are reviewing our process to ensure that we are providing the best possible service to our clients, and we are also

reviewing each provider's stance on different investments and the pension transfer process. With this in mind, I would be grateful if you could confirm the following:"
Douglas Baillie Ltd's email went on to list a series of questions concerning Options' position on the types of transfers and investments it was willing to accept.

- 6 February 2013 - Options' Head of Operations & Technical replied to Douglas Baillie Ltd saying, *"Further to your email, I have noted below your queries with clarification of our position in bold for ease of reference.*

1. *Are you still willing to accept transfers on an insistent client basis where we have advised a client against a transfer, but we have a letter from them stating that they still wish to proceed anyway? **We do not accept final salary transfers on an insistent client basis and have not done so since last year. In line with the recent FSA Alert we would not accept insistent clients on the basis you describe.***
2. *Are you willing to accept subsequent investment into unregulated investments where we have advised a client against it, but have a letter from them stating they still wish to proceed? **No – as the adviser you would need to advise the client on all aspects of their scheme including investments.***
3. *Are you still willing to accept pension transfer business where the client is to be orphaned once the transfer is complete, prior to any investment being made? **No, this would not follow the recent FSA clarifications of their requirements and expectations in respect of advisers.***

Regarding what investments Options would accept, Options said *"GAS Verdant Australian Farmland – Currently accepted but will be subject to a re-review process"* and *"Store First Ltd – Not currently accepting new business as under review"*.

CL&P

CL&P was an unregulated business based in Spain. At the time of the events here, one of the directors of CL&P was a Terence (Terry) Wright. On 15 October 2010, the following was published on the FSA website, in a section called *"Firms and individuals to avoid"*, which was described as: *"a warning list of some unauthorised firms and individuals that we believe you should not deal with"*:

"ALERT

The Financial Services Authority ("FSA") has today published this statement in order to warn investors against dealing with unauthorised firms.

The purpose of this statement is to advise members of the public that an individual

Terence (Terry) Wright

is not authorised under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA) to carry on a regulated activity in the UK. Regulated activities include, amongst other things, advising on investments. The FSA believes that the individual may be targeting UK customers via the firm Cash In Your Pension.

Investors should be aware that the Financial Ombudsman Service and the Financial Services Compensation Scheme [FSCS] are not available if you deal with an unauthorised company or individual.

To find out whether a company or individual is authorised go to our Register of authorised firms and individuals at <http://www.fsa.gov.uk/register/home.do>

In other complaints brought to our Service, Options has told us that it was first approached by CL&P in 2011 and that it entered into discussions about accepting introductions from it. And that Options began to accept introductions from CL&P on 15 August 2011 and ended its relationship with it on 25 May 2012.

Store First

The Store First investment took the form of one or more self-storage units, which were part of a larger storage facility in a UK location. Investors bought one or more units in the facility and were offered a guaranteed level of income for a set period of time. After that, they could either take whatever income the unit(s) provided, or sell them (assuming there was a market for them).

The Store First investment was marketed as offering a guaranteed 8% return in the first two years, an indicated return of 10% in the following two years, and 12% in the next two years. It was also marketed as offering a “*guaranteed*” buy back after five years.

In a separate complaint brought to our Service, Options told us that on 3 May 2011, Options was contacted by a promoter of Store First, Harley Scott, about a newly launched product – Store First. Options says it put this investment through its review process.

In its submissions to us, Options says this review process was established in accordance with its obligations and FSA recommendations at the time, which required it to conduct: “...*due diligence into the Store First investment to assess its suitability for holding within a SIPP.*”

In the letter confirming its acceptance of the investment, Options noted:

- The investor purchases a 250-year lease of a storage unit within a storage facility. The unit is then sublet to the management company, Store First, subject to an initial six-year term with two-year break clauses.
- The investor's interest can be sold/assigned at any time. The break clauses allow the investor to rent out the units individually without the services of the management company (but it insisted they use the management company).
- There was no apparent established market for the investment.
- The investment was potentially illiquid in that it was a direct property investment which may take time to sell. However, it could be sold providing a willing buyer can be found and was assignable so could be transferred in specie to beneficiaries.
- It also said its acceptance was subject to a member declaration and indemnity being completed and signed by each member, and the appointment of a solicitor to act for the Trustees in respect of any purchase.

In May 2014, the Self Storage Association of the UK ('SSA UK') issued a press release (amended in January 2015), detailing the outcome of a review it had commissioned Deloitte LLP to undertake of the marketing material made available to potential investors by Store First.

The release refers to a number of misleading and inaccurate statements made by Store First in its marketing material. It also makes the following observation:

“...a very serious question arises over how Store First is funding the guaranteed returns to existing investors, considering the absence of bank funding and the likely level of losses that require funding in each new store. It may yet prove to be the case that the rental returns being paid to investors are in fact being funded from the sale proceeds of new units, and not the operation of the self-storage business.”

Store First was the subject of a winding up petition issued by the Business Secretary. On 30 April 2019 the Court made an order to wind-up Store First and three associated companies in the public interest by consent between those four companies and the Secretary of State. The Official Receiver was appointed as liquidator and had responsibility for dealing with the assets and liabilities of the four companies.

Following this the freehold, associated assets and goodwill of 15 storage centres were sold by the Official Receiver to a company called Store First Freeholds Limited. As I understand it, the self-storage units continued to be rented to end users and a company called Pay Store now manages the storage sites trading as Store First. The Official Receiver and Store First Freeholds Limited agreed that the latter would accept any requests from investors to surrender their pods. Store First Freeholds Limited would cover its own costs of the surrender, but investors wouldn't receive any payment.

In the judgment in *Adams v Options SIPP UK LLP (formerly Options Pensions UK LLP)* [2020] EWHC 1299 (Ch) ('*Adams v Options*'), the judge found the value of Mr Adams' six pods, acquired for around £52,000 in July 2012, to be £15,000 as of January 2017. And in the judgement in *Adams v Options UK Personal Pensions LLP* [2021] EWCA Civ 1188 it was stated that, in February 2020, Options had said it was valuing Storepods at £430 each following (then) recent sales of Store First storage units at auction and the Court used that value in assessing the redress due to Mr Adams.

GAS Verdant

The GAS Verdant Australian Farmland investment was unregulated and took the form of a 'land purchase contract' which involved a company based in Cyprus (GAS Global Agricultural Services Ltd), which leased plots of agricultural land in Australia to investors. Crops were to be planted on the plots, and the objective was to provide an income to investors through the sale of those crops and capital growth through the sale of the plot of land after eight years. The investor would then receive 80% of the net revenue from the yield of the land for eight years. After this, the land could be sold.

Options hasn't provided a detailed account of the due diligence it carried out in relation to the GAS Verdant investment. But in submissions on separate complaints, Options has said that it completed appropriate due diligence in respect of the investments by ensuring that GAS Verdant was suitable to be held in UK registered pension schemes. This included a review of the investment information, company background checks and also an independent report from an external third party compliance entity.

Options said that from its due diligence checks in relation to GAS Verdant, it was able to conclude this investment was suitable to be held within a SIPP.

Miss B's dealings with CL&P, Douglas Baillie Ltd and Options

Miss B had an occupational defined benefit ('DB') pension. Miss B says that after browsing on the internet, she was contacted about possible investments. She'd had no idea of the

value of her DB pension but was 'pleasantly surprised' when the 'transfer request' came back. Miss B says CL&P passed her to TPS for pension transfer advice.

On 26 June 2012, Miss B signed what appears to be a pre-printed letter to Options to confirm that she had received advice from TPS which she had read and understood, and that she wished to proceed with the transfer of her DB scheme benefits into a new Options SIPP.

On 29 June 2012, TPS sent Miss B's SIPP application to Options, and included confirmation of advice received, the ceding DB scheme discharge forms, and copies of its advice report and TVAS.

Miss B's SIPP application form contained the following information:

- The 'Transfers' section set out the details of Miss B's transferring DB scheme and said the estimated value of her DB scheme benefits was about £153,000. It also contained a ticked box which read *"Please tick the box to indicate that you have received advice on the transfer of this policy"* and confirmed that Douglas Baillie Ltd had provided Miss B *"...with advice in respect of this transfer."*
- The 'Investments' section asked for details of what Miss B's SIPP would be invested in, amongst other things. No information was recorded in this section.
- The 'Financial Adviser Details' section, signed by Miss B and Douglas Baillie Ltd, again set out Douglas Baillie Ltd's details and said *"Please note our fee is for advice on transfer only. No advice has been given by us on investment."*
- The 'Declaration' section signed by Miss B said, amongst other things:
 - *"I understand that it is my sole responsibility to make decisions relating to the purchase, retention or sale of any investment held within the Carey Pension Scheme"*.
 - *"I agree to indemnify Carey Pensions UK LLP 'The Administrator' and Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd 'The Trustee' against any claim in respect of any decision made by myself or my Financial Adviser/Investment Manager or any other professional adviser I choose to appoint from time to time"*.
 - *"I confirm that I am establishing the Carey Pension Scheme on an execution only basis."*

I understand that 'Member Declaration & Indemnity' forms were completed which instructed Options to purchase Miss B's investments in GAS Verdant and Store First. Copies of these forms that I've seen in this and other complaints included statements that made the same points, to the effect that:

- *"I am fully aware that this investment is "Alternative" and is therefore considered High Risk and / or Speculative."*
- *"I am fully aware that both Carey Pensions UK LLP and Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd act on an Execution Only Basis and confirm that neither Carey Pensions UK LLP nor Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd have provided any advice whatsoever in respect of this investment."*
- *"I confirm that I have taken my own advice including financial, investment and tax advice, in respect of this investment."*
- *"I indemnify both Carey Pensions UK LLP and Carey Pension Trustees Ltd against any and all liability arising from this investment."*

Miss B's SIPP was established on 3 July 2012 and Options says her transferred DB pension benefit was received into it on 2 August 2012. Of this, £75,000 was invested into GAS verdant in September 2012 and £27,000 was invested into Store First in October 2012.

In July 2015, Options sent Miss B an annual valuation. This said Options had conservatively valued her Store First investment at 50% of the original purchase price, as it was a physical holding and getting an expert valuation would involve costs that would be borne by Miss B's SIPP. And that Options had also cautiously valued her GAS Verdant investment at 50% of the original purchase price, as the investment manager hadn't provided a current valuation for the land but it was a physical asset. Options repeated these points in its July 2016 email which sent Miss B a link to her SIPP's 2016 annual valuation.

On 16 June 2017, Miss B emailed Options to say, *"I am not sure If you can help me or point me in the right direction, but after careful consideration I would like to look at the possibility of selling my Investment in Storefirst and GAS Verdant."*

I have come to realise that I have made a terrible and costly mistake when deciding to make these investments. I made quite a sizable investment in both and I am horrified that I may have lost everything.

[name of claims management company ('CMC')] (I have no idea who they are and how they got my details) have been in contact with me about the mis-selling of pensions. Additionally, [name of solicitors' firm] have also been in contact about Storefirst (also have no idea how they got my details).

Once again I should be grateful for your help/thoughts on the matter."

Options responded a few days later to explain how she could go about selling her Store First investment, and to explain that GAS Verdant was currently going through a restructure and her investment couldn't be sold until this was finalised. Options' email also said

"You should seek appropriate advice from a qualified professional adviser in relation to financial, legal or tax advice. Carey Pensions administer your pension scheme, on an execution only basis, and act on your written instructions only. We do not manage the investments held within your pension scheme or provide any form of advice.

...

Our records indicate that you received pension transfer advice from the Pensions Specialist in relation to transferring your [DB pension] to a Carey SIPP. I confirm that the Pensions Specialist have been found to be in default by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme in relation to pension transfer advice.

If you feel the advice you received to transfer your pension wasn't suitable which has therefore caused you to invest in funds that have not performed as well as expected i.e. Store First; GAS Verdant, you may be able to claim compensation from the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. Please see below the link to the FSCS website through which you will need to make your claim. Please note the maximum compensation you could receive is £50,000.00 which we understand is less than you [sic] original transfer value."

Based on the evidence provided, Miss B and Options were communicating at various points from November 2017 onwards about the possible sale of her investments. In these, Miss B communicated that she would like to sell her Store First and/or GAS Verdant investments. But I've not seen that either were ultimately sold.

On 6 June 2020, Miss B complained to Options about *"the administration of my pension and how it was invested."* Her complaint said she would reach age 55 this year and had planned to take her pension benefits and retire early because of her health. But she now couldn't do this as she'd now found she had lost most if not all of her investment. And she believed the

Store First and GAS Verdant investments were mis-sold to her, and that the literature promoting them had been financially misleading and facilitated by Options.

In its June 2020 final response to Miss B's complaint, Options thought Miss B had complained too late under the time limit rules. Because it said her complaint was largely about the reduction in value of her investments and the overall SIPP value. It was more than six years since she invested in Store First and GAS Verdant. And it was more than three years since Options sent her an annual valuation dated 6 July 2015 which ought reasonably to have made her aware her investments were valued at half the original purchase price, a point also reiterated in the 2016 annual valuation it emailed to Miss B.

In July 2020 Miss B submitted a claim to the FSCS regarding Douglas Baillie Ltd's advice. Miss B says the FSCS later told her it had classed her claim as 'inactive' because Options hadn't provided the information the FSCS had repeatedly requested. Miss B provided copies of FSCS letters dated September 2020 and May 2021 to support this. And she says the FSCS has told her it can't provide her with a reassignment of rights to enable her to pursue a complaint against Options, because the FSCS had classed her claim as inactive and hadn't paid her any compensation.

Submissions from Miss B

As Miss B was dissatisfied with Options' final response to her complaint, she came to our Service in June 2020.

Amongst other things, Miss B says at the time of the 2012 events, after browsing on the internet she was contacted about possible investments. She says she talked to a number of people about investments. And she'd had no idea of the value of her DB pension, but was pleasantly surprised when the transfer request came back. Miss B says CL&P passed her to TPS for pension transfer advice.

She says she didn't need to access her pension funds immediately at that time, as she'd been made redundant and had some capital, and was too young to retire. That she'd considered her options very carefully and received pension transfer advice from TPS, who had been recommended to her by CL&P.

Miss B says that at that time, she was given the impression that the risk was minimal regardless of what was outlined in the paperwork, that investors normally have a good return overall, and that she was guaranteed a 9% return. And while CL&P told her the value of investments can go down as well as up, it also said security measures were in place to minimise the risk of that happening.

Miss B says the amount being invested meant she'd had some concerns at that time, but after speaking to CL&P she felt confident she was doing the right thing for her future and was impressed by their knowledge. Miss B says that if Options had refused to allow the investments, she probably would have looked elsewhere to improve her pension pot. And she'd received a 'referral fee' – she'd thought this was like a bonus and that Options would have been aware of it. Miss B can't recall precisely what she spent this on, but says it may have been spent on her family's university fees or medical insurance.

Miss B told us she had no knowledge of investments. And that she'd recently found the 2015 SIPP annual valuation but it said the valuations were "*conservative*" and "*cautious*", so it wasn't obvious she would lose everything. And that while she was contacted in 2017 by CMCs and solicitors about her SIPP and investments, she'd thought these were scam calls because she hadn't given them her contact details and because she was also getting calls

about road accidents she'd never had. So at the time, she'd dismissed these and thought Options would've told her if there were real concerns.

Miss B says she had trusted Options and believed that everything would come good in the end. That she'd asked Options to sell her investments a few times but there were always barriers in the way, as both investments were going through restructures which meant she couldn't sell. And she'd queried the investments with Options in 2017, but Options pointed to the advice TPS had provided and steered her to the FSCS in relation to this.

Miss B told us she'd been very unwell and had undergone tests for a number of years before being diagnosed with a serious progressive illness in 2018. So she'd prioritised her health at this time. However, she reached age 55 in 2020 and had planned to retire early because of her health and use her pension benefits for care and making adaptations to her home. And she became aware Options' poor administration of her SIPP meant she'd had lost her pension pot so she couldn't now do these things and was unlikely to get anything back. So she'd done some research on the internet. She looked into the Financial Ombudsman Service and the FSCS. And she looked into consumer reviews of Options, and found she was not alone in having problems with these investments.

Submissions from Options

Options didn't initially provide our Service with its comments on the merits of Miss B's complaint. However, in other separate complaints brought to our Service, Options made the following submissions:

- The client chose to use TPS and provided Options with a letter of authority to this effect.
- Options satisfied itself that the letter of authority related to the same TPS it had carried out due diligence on. As TPS was FCA regulated at the time, Options had no reason to suspect or comment on its advice or communication with the client, which Options wasn't party to. And at that time, Options was not aware of any reason it should reject introductions from TPS.
- The client confirmed to Options that they understood the advice from TPS and wanted to proceed with the transfer. So their complaint should be directed to TPS, because if it hadn't provided regulated advice to the client, Options wouldn't have accepted the transfer and the client wouldn't have made the investments in question.
- Options does not (and is not permitted to) provide any advice to clients in relation to the establishment of a SIPP, transfers in or the underlying investments, nor does it comment in any way on the suitability of a SIPP, the transfers in and investments for an individual's circumstances. It did not advise, nor purport to advise, clients.
- Options acts as the administrator only of the SIPP. Clients opened their SIPP and did not specify in their SIPP application what investments they were interested in. Options provided the client with numerous risk warnings regarding their chosen investments, including the warnings in the Member Declaration & Indemnity forms they signed. These forms were very clear regarding what the investments were and that they were high risk.
- Clients went on to invest on an execution-only (i.e. non-advised) basis and this was made very clear in communications with clients, the documentation issued to them, and the paperwork they read, signed and agreed to.

- As an execution-only business, Options would have been in breach of COBS 11.2.19 had it not followed the signed instructions given to it by a client.
- If the client did not agree to or understand the documentation provided, they should not have signed the paperwork. Options cannot be held responsible for a client's decision to sign documents they knew to be inaccurate or failed to understand, in circumstances where there was no indication this was the case.
- Options did not suggest or recommend the Store First and/or other investments. It is not responsible for the performance or current market value of Store First storage units.
- Options acted on client instructions to establish the SIPP, request the transfers in and specifically to make the investments on their behalf.
- Options carried out an internal investment review and due diligence on the investments which included a review of the relevant investment's information, company background checks and an independent report from an external third-party compliance entity. These checks were sufficient to conclude that these investments were suitable to be held within a UK pension scheme.
- Our Service suggests Options ought to have investigated Store First extensively. We didn't explain why we thought the Enhance Support Solutions ('ESS') report was inconsistent with Options' company searches. We were wrong to say Options should have been concerned by the marketing material and ought to have reached similar conclusions to those later reached by SSA UK and the insolvency service. And were wrong to say Options should have been concerned by the limited risk warnings and lack of proven track record. This was a subjective analysis reached with the benefit of hindsight.
- Our Service said we'd not seen any detail of the due diligence Options carried out on the GAS Verdant investment. Options has resource challenges in addressing the volume of complaints currently before our Service, particularly now we are rapidly progressing them. Options cannot reasonably be expected to have prepared a response, and its right to justice has been inhibited.
- Our Service had concluded that Options shouldn't have allowed the GAS Verdant investment, simply because it was high risk and because it was an investment often made alongside Store First. But one investment has no bearing on the other.
- Our Service retrospectively imposed new duties of due diligence on Options. These duties are inconsistent with the contract the client entered, and with the COBS rules. Options is being held liable because it is the only remaining regulated entity over which our Service has jurisdiction.
- The judge in Adams rejected that Options owed duties of the kinds now being relied upon by reference to any legally actionable COBS rules. They also held that, in any event, adequate due diligence had been carried out by any reasonable measure (Adams [16], [155]) having regard to all the evidence (which included the FSA notice concerning Mr Wright). Our Service should give significant weight to those findings in reaching its conclusions. And if it disagrees, explain why it can dismiss them.
- At the time of the transaction, there was nothing in the DISP rules preventing SIPP providers accepting business from unregulated introducers, execution-only customers or high-risk business. Instead, the FSA regarded Options' approach to accepting such

business as entirely acceptable. These points were made clear in the Adams first instance judgment.

- The FSA Notice regarding Mr Wright wasn't entered onto World Check until after Options had carried out its checks on CL&P and started accepting its business. So, even if Options had searched World Check when its relationship with CL&P began, it wouldn't have seen this notice. Options didn't routinely check the FSA's list of unauthorised firms and individuals, and wasn't obliged to do so.
- The FSA Notice published in 2010, before Options began its relationship with CL&P, stated only that Mr Wright was not regulated by the FSA and referred only to a business named 'Cash In Your Pension' targeting UK investors. There was nothing in the FSA Notice which described any criminal or civil wrongdoing and there was no contradiction between the FSA Notice and any statement provided by Mr Wright that they were not subject to any FSA action or censure. So even if Options' searches had revealed the FSA Notice, it shouldn't necessarily have led Options to conclude it shouldn't accept introductions from CL&P.
- If the FSA had significant concerns about Mr Wright or expected regulated firms not to deal with him or CL&P, the FSA Notice would have explicitly said so. But it did not. Given this, it wasn't fair or reasonable to say Options should have had such concerns or refused to deal with CL&P.
- The FCA visited Options and approved its due diligence procedures in September 2011, shortly before Options accepted the client's SIPP application.

In other complaints, Options provided the following comments regarding its relationship with Douglas Baillie Ltd:

- An Introducer Profile and an Introducer Agreement between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd was signed on 20 October 2011. This set out Options' terms of business and the conduct it expected of Douglas Baillie Ltd.
- Douglas Baillie Ltd introduced 59 clients to Options, between 12 December 2011 and 4 October 2012.
- Commission was agreed between the client and Douglas Baillie Ltd depending on transfer value, with the average commission being 2.11%.
- Douglas Baillie Ltd was FCA regulated at the relevant times. Had the client not first received regulated financial advice, Options would not have accepted the transfer and the client would not have made the Store First and GAS Verdant investments.
- As Douglas Baillie Ltd was FCA regulated, Options had no reason to suspect or comment on any advice or communication between the client and Douglas Baillie Ltd, of which Options was not party to. And at the time of the client's SIPP application, Options was not aware of any reason it shouldn't accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd.
- The majority of clients introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd invested in either Store First and/or GAS Verdant. The remainder of these invested in Central and South American forestry investments.

In other complaints, Options provided the following comments regarding its relationship with CL&P:

- Options carried out due diligence on CL&P. An Introducer Profile was completed and an Introducer Agreement was signed, setting out Options' terms of business and the conduct it expected of CL&P. Options was aware CL&P was not FCA authorised, but the FCA did not prohibit Options from dealing with unregulated introducers.
- Any reasonable client should have been aware that being offered a cash incentive payment to make an investment was suspect. The client chose to accept a cash incentive and not disclose it to Options, thereby contributing to the loss they suffered. If the client had disclosed this incentive payment to Options, Options would have refused to accept the investment instructions.
- Had Options refused to process the client's application for any reason, the client would have likely made the same investment via a different SIPP provider in order to secure the incentive payment. And so the client would have suffered the same loss.

One of our Investigator's thought Miss B's complaint had been brought within the relevant time limits, because he thought she'd become aware she had cause for complaint about Options in around mid-2020. The Investigator also thought Miss B's complaint should be upheld. He said Options should've been concerned that Douglas Baillie Ltd only advising on the transfer, not the underlying high-risk and unregulated investments, risked consumer detriment. And the Store First marketing literature meant Options should've been concerned consumers were being misled about the returns and risks associated with the investment and that there was the risk of consumer detriment. He thought that had Options acted fairly and reasonably, it shouldn't have accepted Miss B's application to open a SIPP. And given this, it was fair and reasonable for Options to compensate Miss B for her financial loss and to pay her an additional £500 compensation for the distress and inconvenience Options had caused her.

Miss B accepted the Investigator's view of her complaint.

Options disagreed with the Investigator's view and provided further comments. It reiterated some of the comments it had made in other complaints, which are summarised above. But the new comments Options made were, in summary, that:

- Investment performance is a central focus of the complaint Miss B made in June 2020, so the value of the investments must therefore have been a factor in her decision to complain. Therefore, when the 2015 annual valuation informed Miss B that the value of her investments had significantly reduced, she would or should have known she had cause to complain.
- Further or alternatively, the communication Miss B had with Options in June 2017 made clear Miss B knew there was a problem and that she'd had the opportunity to take independent advice from the CMC and solicitors that had contacted her. And this communication raised materially the same issue as her June 2020 complaint. So it's more likely than not that Miss B knew she had cause for complaint more than three years before she complained. An oral hearing should be held to explore this matter.
- The questions our Investigator asked Miss B appear to fall short of those asked in Adams. So an oral hearing should also determine Miss B's motivations to invest, release money and to transfer against TPS's advice. And her state of knowledge regarding her Store First investment, of Options' role, and the 'referral fee' payment. Further, Options hasn't had the opportunity to contribute to the questions asked of Miss B or challenge her answers.

- It's not fair or reasonable to consider Miss B's complaint in light of guidance issued after the events complained of, or on the basis of what we consider good industry practice. The guidance went beyond reflecting what the industry was already doing; it introduced new expectations.
- Even if the 2009 Thematic Review Report had been statutory guidance (which it wasn't), the breach of such statutory guidance wouldn't give rise to a claim for damages under FSMA S.138D. And many of the matters it invites firms to "*consider*" are directed at firms providing advisory services, not firms providing execution-only services. The FCA's Enforcement Guide says "*Guidance is not binding on those to whom the FCA's rules apply. Nor are the variety of materials (such as case studies showing good or bad practice, FCA speeches and generic letters written by the FCA to Chief Executives in particular sectors) published to support the rules and guidance in the Handbook. Rather, such materials are intended to illustrate ways (but not the only ways) in which a person can comply with the relevant rules.*"
- Regulatory publications cannot found a claim for compensation in themselves and do not assist in construction of the Principles.
- Our Service is set on finding Options liable regardless of any fact pattern or the reality of the relevant circumstances. In this case, Miss B received advice from TPS, a regulated financial adviser. The regulator had not raised any concerns about TPS, removed its permissions, or taken any regulatory action against it. Options undertook due diligence on TPS to establish that it held the necessary permissions – which it did – and put in place terms of business. Options is not a regulator – it is not for Options to 'look behind' the regulated status of the adviser or the permissions it holds.
- TPS advised Miss B not to proceed with the transfer and that if she transferred, she would lose the guarantees associated with her DB pension. TPS only proceeded on an 'insistent client' basis i.e., Miss B insisted on the transfer against TPS's clear and direct advice.
- The Investigator failed to take account of relevant law and regulations as required by section 228(2) of FSMA and DISP 3.6.4R, or explain why they had departed from the relevant law. In particular, they didn't state whether the due diligence duty they found to exist is one recognised by law (rather than some broader professional standards) and, if so, the legal foundation of the duty. The duties suggested would not be recognised in a Court and legal liability would not be established.
- Options had very limited obligation to undertake due diligence on the Store First investment. In Adams, the High Court refused to recognise a duty of due diligence such as that set out in the provisional decision, instead concluding that the obligations are framed by reference to the context of the contractual relationship between the parties.
- In Adams, HHJ Dight said that, if he had to express a view on the subject, Options "*undertook appropriate due diligence and behaved appropriately in the best interests of their clients*", before accepting the relevant application and investment instructions. And this was not disturbed by the Court of Appeal.
- Our Investigator suggests Options should have provided additional information to Miss B, but fails to state what and how this should have been communication to her. They also fail to explain why Miss B wouldn't still have proceeded with the investment, given Miss B ignored TPS advice not to transfer and investment risk warnings.

- Those findings amount to saying Options was obliged to undertake a qualitative assessment of the Store First investment and give its findings to Miss B – in effect, to have provided advice to Miss B. That significantly overreaches the actual legal obligations on Options at the time, as found by the Court in Adams. Options didn't have the necessary permissions to advise, and doing so knowingly could have amounted to a criminal offence.
- Had Options given Miss B the (unspecified) warnings our Investigator says it should have, Miss B would have invested in Store First anyway, given her demonstrated willingness to act against advice.
- Miss B's testimony is unreliable and self-serving. She says she was told the risk was small, despite the paperwork warning that the investment was high risk.
- It's likely Miss B was keen to proceed with the investment in order to release funds, and would have found a way to invest even if Options had not been dealing with TPS or accepting Store First investments. And it was wrong for our Investigator to suggest that another SIPP provider couldn't legitimately have accepted Miss B's investment instruction.
- Miss B's testimony is that she was speaking to a number of people about investments. Once the transfer took place, Miss B immediately lost the safeguarded benefits of her DB pension regardless of whether or not she opened the SIPP and/or completed the onward investments. So Miss B would have suffered a loss regardless of what actions Options did or did not take.
- Our Investigator said Options shouldn't have accepted Miss B's business in the first place so is liable for all of her loss. But the contract between Miss B and Options relieved Options of any liability it might otherwise bear - concluding otherwise would render void and unenforceable a validly concluded contract. No other legally recognised duty (e.g. in tort or under COBS 2.1.1R) would justify the conclusion our Service reached. And restitution under section 27 of the FSMA would not be available in this case, not least because the case-specific factors relied upon by the Court of Appeal in Adams for refusing section 28 relief are absent in this case.
- Miss B should bear some responsibility for her own actions here. Miss B transferred against advice. Options told her the investments were high risk. Miss B deliberately deceived Options by signing Member Declaration and Indemnity forms to confirm she'd not received an inducement payment. Those forms set out Options responsibilities to her. Therefore, this should be reflected in any redress calculation.
- Miss B's alleged loss is within the realms of possible performance of an investment. The mere underperformance of an investment does not create a wrong or a liability.
- The Investigator said Options should pay Miss B £500 compensation for distress and inconvenience, but hadn't evidenced that Miss B suffered any distress.
- If our Service's current conclusions stand, Options would be penalised for failing to act in a way which was inconsistent with the contractual and regulatory scheme, and which would in practice have involved it in breaching its permissions.
- And there would also be serious wider consequences for consumers and for execution-only SIPP providers. Because if execution-only SIPP providers are made liable for the

poor investment choices of consumers, the execution-only SIPP market will reduce, depriving consumers of a low-cost investment route.

As agreement couldn't be reached, this complaint was passed to me.

I issued a provisional decision in which I concluded that Miss B's complaint had been brought in time under the relevant time limit rules and that it should be upheld. In summary, I said Options shouldn't have accepted business from Douglas Baillie and/or accepted the Store First and GAS Verdant investments to be held in its SIPPs, before it had received Miss B's application. I said that if Options hadn't accepted Miss B's introduction from Douglas Baillie and/or the Store First and GAS Verdant investments to be held in its SIPPs, Miss B wouldn't have established an Options SIPP, transferred her DB scheme monies into it or invested in Store First and GAS Verdant. I said it was fair and reasonable for Options to compensate Miss B for the full measure of the loss she's suffered as a result of Options accepting her business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and permitting her to invest her SIPP monies in Store First and GAS Verdant. So I said Options should undertake a redress calculation for Miss B, and also pay her £750 compensation for her distress.

Miss B accepted the provisional decision and provided some further comments and evidence. Amongst other things, Miss B told us:

- More about the impact Options' errors had on her.
- CL&P had given her a GAS Verdant information sheet at the time of the relevant events, which Miss B provided a copy of. This sheet is dated 2011 and says, amongst other things, that CL&P thanked her for her time in their recent telephone conversation, and that this investment offered the opportunity to *"double her pension"* in seven years and to *"be safe, be secure in such turbulent times"*.
- She'd had no reason to believe any cash payment made an investment 'suspect', but she'd been a novice. Miss B provided a letter dated 19 April 2012 from a firm based in Gibraltar regarding her Store First investment, which said her 'referral fee' was estimated to be £6,080.
- She had signed paperwork at the time of the events, but she'd not had any relevant knowledge or experience and she'd trusted the people she was communicating with.
- She's happy for Options to take ownership of the investments, and wasn't aware of them having been sold yet.

Despite being provided with the opportunity to do so, Options didn't provide any response to the provisional decision.

I'm now in a position to make my decision.

What I've decided – and why

Time limits

Firstly, I've reconsidered whether this is a complaint our Service can consider. Having done so, I remain satisfied this complaint has been brought within the relevant time limit rules.

Our ability to consider complaints is set out in Chapter 2 (DISP 2) of the FCA's Handbook of Rules and Guidance. DISP 2.8.2R says:

The Ombudsman cannot consider a complaint if the complainant refers it to the Financial Ombudsman Service...

(2) *more than:*

(a) six years after the event complained of; or (if later)

(b) three years from the date on which the complainant became aware (or ought reasonably to have become aware) that he had cause for complaint;

unless the complainant referred the complaint to the respondent or the Ombudsman within that period and has a written acknowledgement or some other record of the complaint having been received;

unless:

(3) in the view of the Ombudsman, the failure to comply with the time limits...was as a result of exceptional circumstances.

Miss B's June 2020 complaint to Options was about the administration of her pension and how it was invested, as she thought the investment had been mis-sold to her and that misleading promotional literature had been facilitated by Options.

In its final response to that complaint, Options addressed the due diligence it had carried out in 2012 before accepting her SIPP application and allowing her investments in Store First and GAS Verdant. Options essentially concluded it had carried out sufficient due diligence, but Miss B disagreed and referred the matter to our Service.

So in the matter referred to our Service, the events complained of took place in 2012. This is clearly more than six years before Miss B complained to Options. So I'm satisfied Miss B's complaint has been brought outside the six-year part of the rule.

Therefore, I must consider the three-year part of the rule. Under this, I need to consider when Miss B ought reasonably to have become aware she had cause for complaint.

The term 'complaint' is defined for the purposes of DISP in the FCA handbook as:

"any oral or written expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, from, or on behalf of, a person about the provision of, or failure to provide, a financial service...which:

- a) Alleges that the complainant has suffered (or may suffer) financial loss, material distress or material inconvenience; and*
- b) Relates to an activity of that respondent, or any other respondent with whom that respondent has some connection in marketing or providing financial services or products ...which comes under the jurisdiction of the Financial Ombudsman Service."*

And *respondent* means a regulated firm covered by the jurisdiction of the Financial Ombudsman Service.

So, the material points required for Miss B to have awareness of a cause for complaint include:

- awareness of a problem;
- awareness that the problem had or may have caused her material loss; and
- awareness that the problem was or may have been caused by an act or omission of Options (the respondent in this complaint).

Options says Miss B ought reasonably to have been aware from the July 2015 SIPP annual valuation that she had cause for complaint about her investments' substantial loss of value. I

see the July 2015 annual valuation explains that Options had valued her investments at half their original purchase price, although it caveats this by saying these are “*conservative*” and “*cautious*” valuations.

But even if I were to accept that the July 2015 annual valuation meant Miss B ought reasonably to have been aware there was a problem with her investments that may have caused her a loss, I’m not satisfied that it, or the later communication between Options and Miss B, ought reasonably to have made Miss B aware that the problem with her SIPP investments may have been caused by an act or omission of Options.

Miss B had been introduced to her investments by CL&P, and she made the investments after Douglas Baillie Ltd advised her regarding transferring her pension. So I think it’s reasonable to conclude that Miss B’s first thoughts would have been that CL&P and/or Douglas Baillie Ltd were responsible for the problem with her investments. And I think her later communications with Options would have reinforced that thought. Because after Miss B expressed concern in June 2017 about her investments value, Options told her it didn’t manage the investments or provide any advice and instead pointed her towards Douglas Baillie Ltd’s advice and the possibility that the FSCS might compensate her in relation to that.

In addition, I’ve seen nothing to make me think Miss B had more than a general level of knowledge and experience relating to pensions. Pensions are complex financial arrangements. And I’m mindful that the regulator thought it necessary to issue a number of reminders, which I’ll detail later, to SIPP operators about their obligations, as the regulator was concerned they didn’t properly understand their own responsibilities. So, I don’t think it would be reasonable to conclude that Miss B, as a lay person, ought at this time to herself have realised that Options, as her SIPP provider, might bear responsibility for the problems with her investment.

I accept that by June 2017 Miss B had been contacted by a CMC about pension mis-selling, and by a solicitor about her Store First investment. Options argues this means Miss B had the opportunity to take independent professional advice at that time. But Miss B says she discounted these contacts at the time as she thought they were scams. And I’ve seen nothing to make me think that Miss B did in fact seek or take such professional advice - I note she has represented herself throughout this complaint.

That said, I think it’s reasonable to expect that a consumer with Miss B’s problem would have done some research about that problem, at a level appropriate to a lay consumer. And I don’t think a reasonable consumer with Miss B’s problem would carry out such research only once and then close their mind to the problem. Instead, I think the level of research an ordinary retail consumer might reasonably be expected to have continued to carry out would, by early 2019, have meant that Miss B ought reasonably to have become aware that the SIPP provider (Options in this case) might also have a responsibility for the problem she had, as well as Douglas Baillie Ltd.

I say this because the unsuccessful judicial review challenge in the Berkeley Burke judgment was published on 30 October 2018, and there was a lot of publicity surrounding it. And it could be seen from this publicity that much of the industry’s position, that SIPP provider’s obligations were very limited, did not seem to be correct. It could also be seen that the regulator’s view, and the Financial Ombudsman Service’s view, were different, and that an Ombudsman had decided that a SIPP operator was responsible for the losses a consumer suffered in some circumstances and the court had rejected the SIPP operator’s challenge to that decision.

So, after allowing time to notice the change in the landscape following the Berkeley Burke judgment and work out the implications for her, I think Miss B ought reasonably to have been aware by the start of 2019 that Options may have a responsibility for the problem with her SIPP that had caused her a financial loss. And Miss B complained to Options less than three years later, in June 2020. Therefore, I'm satisfied Miss B's complaint has been brought in time under the three-year part of the rules and so is a complaint our Service can consider.

Given this, I've gone on to consider the merits of Miss B's complaint. But first, I'll address Options' request for an oral hearing.

Oral hearing request

Options says that an oral hearing is necessary to determine when Miss B was aware, or ought reasonably to have been aware, she had cause for complaint. And to determine her motivations and state of knowledge regarding the Store First investment, Options' role and the payment she received. As Options hasn't had the opportunity to contribute to the questions asked of Miss B or challenge her answers.

The Ombudsman Service provides a scheme under which certain disputes may be resolved quickly and with minimum formality (section 225 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 ("FSMA")). DISP 3.5.5R of the FCA Dispute Resolution rules provide the following:

"If the Ombudsman considers that the complaint can be fairly determined without convening a hearing, he will determine the complaint. If not, he will invite the parties to take part in a hearing. A hearing may be held by any means which the Ombudsman considers appropriate in the circumstances, including by telephone. No hearing will be held after the Ombudsman has determined the complaint".

Given my statutory duty under FSMA to resolve complaints quickly and with minimum formality, I am satisfied that it would normally not be necessary for me to hold a hearing in most cases (see the Court of Appeal's decision in *R (Heather Moor & Edgecomb Ltd) v Financial Ombudsman Service* [2008] EWCA Civ 642).

The key question for me to consider when deciding whether a hearing should be held is whether or not *"the complaint can be fairly determined without convening a hearing"*.

We do not operate in the same way as the Courts. Unlike a Court, we have the power to carry out our own investigation. And the rules (DISP 3.5.8R) mean I, as the Ombudsman determining this complaint, am able to decide the issues on which evidence is required and how that evidence should be presented. I am not restricted to oral cross-examination to further explore or test points.

If I decide particular information is required to decide a complaint fairly, in most circumstances we are able to request this information from either party to the complaint, or even from a third party. In this case, we have undertaken an investigation and asked for the evidence that we needed to complete that. Options has had the opportunity to consider and comment on our Investigator's view. And it will have the opportunity to consider and comment on my provisional decision.

I have carefully considered the submissions Options has made. And I am satisfied that I'm able to fairly determine this complaint without convening a hearing. In this case, I am satisfied I have sufficient information to make a fair and reasonable decision. So, I don't consider a hearing – or any further investigation by other means – is required.

In any event – and I make this point only for completeness - even if I were to invite the parties to participate in a hearing, that would not be an opportunity for Options to cross-examine Miss B as a witness. Our hearings do not follow the same format as a Court. We are inquisitorial in nature and not adversarial. The purpose of any hearing would be solely for the Ombudsman to obtain further information from the parties that they require in order to fairly determine the complaint. The parties would not usually be allowed direct questioning or cross-examination of the other party to the complaint.

As I'm satisfied it isn't necessary for me to hold an oral hearing, I'll now turn to considering the merits of Miss B's complaint.

The merits of Miss B's complaint

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 remain of the view that this complaint should be upheld. I'll explain why.

Relevant considerations

I've carefully taken account of the relevant considerations to decide what's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this complaint.

Before I set out the reasoning for my decision, it's important for me to say that in considering what is fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of this complaint, I have taken into account relevant law and regulations; regulators rules; guidance and standards; codes of practice; and where appropriate, what I consider to have been good industry practice at the relevant time.

In my view, the FCA's Principles for Businesses are of particular relevance. The Principles for Businesses, which are set out in the FCA's Handbook "*are a general statement of the fundamental obligations of firms under the regulatory system*" (PRIN 1.1.2G – at the relevant date). Principles 2, 3 and 6 provide:

"Principle 2 – Skill, care and diligence – A firm must conduct its business with due skill, care and diligence.

Principle 3 – Management and control – A firm must take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively, with adequate risk management systems.

Principle 6 – Customers' interests – A firm must pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly."

I've carefully considered the relevant law and what this says about the application of the FCA's Principles. In *R (British Bankers Association) v Financial Services Authority* [2011] EWHC 999 (Admin) ('BBA') Ouseley J said at paragraph 162:

"The Principles are best understood as the ever present substrata to which the specific rules are added. The Principles always have to be complied with. The Specific rules do not supplant them and cannot be used to contradict them. They are but specific applications of them to the particular requirements they cover. The general notion that the specific rules can exhaust the application of the Principles is inappropriate. It cannot be an error of law for the Principles to augment specific rules."

And at paragraph 77 of *BBA* Ouseley J said:

“Indeed, it is my view that it would be a breach of statutory duty for the Ombudsman to reach a view on a case without taking the Principles into account in deciding what would be fair and reasonable and what redress to afford. Even if no Principles had been produced by the FSA, the FOS would find it hard to fulfil its particular statutory duty without having regard to the sort of high level Principles which find expression in the Principles, whoever formulated them. They are of the essence of what is fair and reasonable, subject to the argument about their relationship to specific rules.”

In *R (Berkeley Burke SIPP Administration Ltd) v Financial Ombudsman Service* [2018] EWHC 2878 (*‘BBSAL’*), Berkeley Burke brought a judicial review claim challenging the decision of an Ombudsman who’d upheld a consumer’s complaint against it. The Ombudsman considered the FCA Principles and good industry practice at the relevant time. He concluded that it was fair and reasonable for Berkeley Burke to have undertaken due diligence in respect of the investment before allowing it into the SIPP wrapper, and that if it had done so, it would have refused to accept the investment. The Ombudsman found Berkeley Burke had therefore not complied with its regulatory obligations and hadn’t treated its client fairly.

Jacobs J, having set out some paragraphs of *BBA* including paragraph 162 set out above, said (at paragraph 104 of *BBSAL*):

“These passages explain the overarching nature of the Principles. As the FCA correctly submitted in their written argument, the role of the Principles is not merely to cater for new or unforeseen circumstances. The judgment in BBA shows that they are, and indeed were always intended to be, of general application. The aim of the Principles-based regulation described by Ouseley J. was precisely not to attempt to formulate a code covering all possible circumstances, but instead to impose general duties such as those set out in Principles 2 and 6.”

The *BBSAL* judgment also considers section 228 of the FSMA and the approach an Ombudsman is to take when deciding a complaint. The judgment of Jacobs J in *BBSAL* upheld the lawfulness of the approach taken by the Ombudsman in that complaint, which I’ve described above, and included the Principles and good industry practice at the relevant time as relevant considerations that were required to be taken into account.

As outlined above, Ouseley J in the *BBA* case held that it would be a breach of statutory duty if I were to reach a view on a complaint without taking the Principles into account in deciding what’s fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of a case. And, Jacobs J adopted a similar approach to the application of the Principles in *BBSAL*. I’m therefore satisfied that the Principles are a relevant consideration that I must take into account when deciding this complaint.

On 18 May 2020, the High Court handed down its judgment in the case of *Adams v Options SIPP* [2020] EWHC 1229 (Ch). Mr Adams subsequently appealed the decision of the High Court and, on 1 April 2021, the Court of Appeal handed down its judgment in *Adams v Options UK Personal Pensions LLP* [2021] EWCA Civ 474. I’ve taken account of both these judgments and the judgment in *Adams v Options UK Personal Pensions LLP* [2021] EWCA Civ 1188 when making this decision on Miss B’s case.

I’ve considered whether *Adams* means that the Principles should not be taken into account in deciding this case. I note that the Principles for Businesses didn’t form part of Mr Adams’ pleadings in his initial case against Options SIPP. And, HHJ Dight didn’t consider the application of the Principles to SIPP operators in his judgment. The Court of Appeal also

gave no consideration to the application of the Principles to SIPP operators. So, neither of the judgments say anything about how the Principles apply to an Ombudsman's consideration of a complaint. But, to be clear, I don't say this means *Adams* isn't a relevant consideration at all. As noted above, I've taken account of the *Adams* judgments when making this decision on Miss B's case.

I acknowledge that COBS 2.1.1R (*A firm must act honestly, fairly and professionally in accordance with the best interests of its client*) overlaps with certain of the Principles, and that this rule was considered by HHJ Dight in the High Court case. Mr Adams pleaded that Options SIPP owed him a duty to comply with COBS 2.1.1R, a breach of which, he argued, was actionable pursuant to section 138(D) of the FSMA ('the COBS claim'). HHJ Dight rejected this claim and found that Options SIPP had complied with the best interests rule on the facts of Mr Adams' case.

The Court of Appeal rejected Mr Adams' appeal against HHJ Dight's dismissal of the COBS claim, on the basis that Mr Adams was seeking to advance a case that was radically different to that found in his initial pleadings. The Court found that this part of Mr Adams' appeal didn't so much represent a challenge to the grounds on which HHJ Dight had dismissed the COBS claim, but rather was an attempt to put forward an entirely new case.

I note that in *Adams v Options SIPP*, HHJ Dight found that the factual context of a case would inform the extent of the duty imposed by COBS 2.1.1R. HHJ Dight said at paragraph 148:

"In my judgment in order to identify the extent of the duty imposed by Rule 2.1.1 one has to identify the relevant factual context, because it is apparent from the submissions of each of the parties that the context has an impact on the ascertainment of the extent of the duty. The key fact, perhaps composite fact, in the context is the agreement into which the parties entered, which defined their roles and functions in the transaction."

I note that there are significant differences between the breaches of COBS 2.1.1R alleged by Mr Adams and the issues in Miss B's complaint. The breaches were summarised in paragraph 120 of the Court of Appeal judgment. In particular, HHJ Dight considered the contractual relationship between the parties in the context of Mr Adams' pleaded breaches of COBS 2.1.1R that happened *after* the contract was entered into. And he wasn't asked to consider the question of due diligence *before* Options SIPP agreed to accept the Storepods investment into its SIPP.

In Miss B's complaint, amongst other things, I'm considering whether Options ought to have identified that the Store First and GAS Verdant investments involved a significant risk of consumer detriment and, if so, whether it ought to have declined to accept applications to invest in Store First and GAS Verdant *before* it received Miss B's application. And the same applied to Options deciding whether to accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd.

The facts of Mr Adams' and Miss B's cases are also different. I make that point to highlight that there are factual differences between *Adams v Options SIPP* and Miss B's case. And I need to construe the duties Options owed to Miss B under COBS 2.1.1R in light of the specific facts of Miss B's case.

So I've considered COBS 2.1.1R – alongside the remainder of the relevant considerations, and within the factual context of Miss B's case, including Options' role in the transaction.

However, I think it's important to emphasise that I must determine this complaint by reference to what is, in my opinion, fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. And, in doing that, I'm required to take into account relevant considerations which include:

law and regulations; regulators' rules, guidance and standards; codes of practice; and, where appropriate, what I consider to have been good industry practice at the relevant time. This is a clear and relevant point of difference between this complaint and the judgments in *Adams v Options SIPP*. That was a legal claim which was defined by the formal pleadings in Mr Adams' statement of case.

I also want to emphasise that I don't say that Options was under any obligation to advise Miss B on the SIPP and/or the underlying investments. Refusing to accept an application isn't the same thing as advising Miss B on the merits of the SIPP and/or the underlying investments.

Overall, I'm satisfied that COBS 2.1.1R is a relevant consideration – but that it needs to be considered alongside the remainder of the relevant considerations, and within the factual context of Miss B's case.

Options has pointed out that a contravention of the Principles cannot in itself give rise to any cause of action at law. That may be true. However, I am dealing with a complaint, not a cause of action, and what I am seeking to identify here is what is relevant to my consideration of what is fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this case. And I'm satisfied that the FCA's Principles are a relevant consideration that I must take into account when deciding this complaint.

The regulatory publications

The FCA (and its predecessor, the FSA) issued a number of publications which reminded SIPP operators of their obligations and which set out how they might achieve the outcomes envisaged by the Principles, namely:

- The 2009 and 2012 Thematic Review Reports.
- The October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance.
- The July 2014 "Dear CEO" letter.

I've considered the relevance of these publications. And I've set out material parts of the publications here, although I've considered them in their entirety.

The 2009 Thematic Review Report

The 2009 Report included the following statement:

"We are very clear that SIPP operators, regardless of whether they provide advice, are bound by Principle 6 of the Principles for Businesses ('a firm must pay due regard to the interests of its clients and treat them fairly') insofar as they are obliged to ensure the fair treatment of their customers. COBS 3.2.3(2) states that a member of a pension scheme is a 'client' for COBS purposes, and 'Customer' in terms of Principle 6 includes clients.

It is the responsibility of SIPP operators to continuously analyse the individual risks to themselves and their clients, with reference to the six TCF consumer outcomes.

...

We agree that firms acting purely as SIPP operators are not responsible for the SIPP advice given by third parties such as IFAs. However, we are also clear that SIPP operators cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility, and we would expect them to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs. Such instances could then be addressed in an appropriate way, for example by

contacting the members to confirm the position, or by contacting the firm giving advice and asking for clarification. Moreover, while they are not responsible for the advice, there is a reputational risk to SIPP operators that facilitate SIPPs that are unsuitable or detrimental to clients.

Of particular concern were firms whose systems and controls were weak and inadequate to the extent that they had not identified obvious potential instances of poor advice and/or potential financial crime. Depending on the facts and circumstances of individual cases, we may take enforcement action against SIPP operators who do not safeguard their customers' interests in this respect, with reference to Principle 3 of the Principles for Businesses ('a firm must take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively, with adequate risk management systems').

The following are examples of measures that SIPP operators could consider, taken from examples of good practice that we observed and suggestions we have made to firms:

- Confirming, both initially and on an ongoing basis, that intermediaries that advise clients are authorised and regulated by the FSA, that they have the appropriate permissions to give the advice they are providing to the firm's clients, and that they do not appear on the FSA website listing warning notices.*
- Having Terms of Business agreements governing relationships, and clarifying respective responsibilities, with intermediaries introducing SIPP business.*
- Routinely recording and reviewing the type (i.e. the nature of the SIPP investment) and size of investments recommended by intermediaries that give advice and introduce clients to the firm, so that potentially unsuitable SIPPs can be identified.*
- Being able to identify anomalous investments, e.g. unusually small or large transactions or more 'esoteric' investments such as unquoted shares, together with the intermediary that introduced the business. This would enable the firm to seek appropriate clarification, e.g. from the client or their adviser, if it is concerned about the suitability of what was recommended.*
- Requesting copies of the suitability reports provided to clients by the intermediary giving advice. While SIPP operators are not responsible for advice, having this information would enhance the firm's understanding of its clients, making the facilitation of unsuitable SIPPs less likely.*
- Routinely identifying instances of execution-only clients who have signed disclaimers taking responsibility for their investment decisions, and gathering and analysing data regarding the aggregate volume of such business.*
- Identifying instances of clients waiving their cancellation rights, and the reasons for this."*

Although I've referred to selected parts of the publications, to illustrate their relevance, I've considered them in their entirety.

I acknowledge that the 2009 and 2012 Thematic Review Reports and the "Dear CEO" letter aren't formal guidance (whereas the 2013 finalised guidance is). However, the fact that the reports and "Dear CEO" letter didn't constitute formal guidance doesn't mean their importance should be underestimated. They provide a reminder that the Principles for Businesses apply and are an indication of the kinds of things a SIPP operator might do to

ensure it is treating its customers fairly and produce the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. In that respect, the publications which set out the regulators' expectations of what SIPP operators should be doing also go some way to indicate what I consider amounts to good industry practice, and I'm therefore satisfied it's appropriate to take them into account.

It's relevant that when deciding what amounted to good industry practice in the *BBSAL* case, the Ombudsman found that *"the regulator's reports, guidance and letter go a long way to clarify what should be regarded as good practice and what should not."* And the judge in *BBSAL* endorsed the lawfulness of the approach taken by the Ombudsman.

At its introduction the 2009 Thematic Review Report says:

"In this report, we describe the findings of this thematic review, and make clear what we expect of SIPP operator firms in the areas we reviewed. It also provides examples of good practices we found."

And, as referenced above, the report goes on to provide *"...examples of measures that SIPP operators could consider, taken from examples of good practice that we observed and suggestions we have made to firms."*

So, I'm satisfied that the 2009 Report is a *reminder* that the Principles apply and it gives an indication of the kinds of things a SIPP operator might do to ensure it is treating its customers fairly and produce the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. The Report set out the regulator's expectations of what SIPP operators should be doing and therefore indicates what I consider amounts to good industry practice at the relevant time. So I'm satisfied it's relevant and therefore appropriate to take it into account.

Options argues that many of the matters which the Report invites firms to consider are directed at firms providing advisory services. But, to be clear, I think the Report is also directed at firms like Options acting purely as SIPP operators. The Report says that *"We are very clear that SIPP operators, regardless of whether they provide advice, are bound by Principle 6 of the Principles for Businesses..."* And it's noted prior to the good practice examples quoted above that *"We agree that firms acting purely as SIPP operators are not responsible for the SIPP advice given by third parties such as IFAs. However, we are also clear that SIPP operators cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility, and we would expect them to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs."*

The remainder of the publications also provide a *reminder* that the Principles for Businesses apply and are an indication of the kinds of things a SIPP operator might do to ensure it is treating its customers fairly and to produce the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. In that respect, these publications also go some way to indicate what I consider amounts to good industry practice at the relevant time. I therefore remain satisfied it's appropriate to take them into account too.

Like the Ombudsman in the *BBSAL* case, I don't think the fact the publications, (other than the 2009 Thematic Review Report), post-date the events that took place in relation to Miss B's complaint, mean that the examples of good practice they provide weren't good practice at the time of the relevant events. Although the later publications were published after the events subject to this complaint, the Principles that underpin them existed throughout, as did the obligation to act in accordance with the Principles.

It's also clear from the text of the 2009 and 2012 Thematic Review Reports (and the *"Dear CEO"* letter in 2014) that the regulator expected SIPP operators to have incorporated the

recommended good practices into the conduct of their business already. So, whilst the regulators' comments suggest some industry participants' understanding of how the good practice standards shaped what was expected of SIPP operators changed over time, it's clear the standards themselves hadn't changed.

I note the judge in the *Adams* case didn't consider the 2012 Thematic Review Report, 2013 SIPP operator guidance and 2014 "Dear CEO" letter to be of relevance to his consideration of Mr Adams' claim. But it doesn't follow that those publications are irrelevant to my consideration of what's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this complaint. I'm required to take into account good industry practice at the relevant time. And, as mentioned, the publications indicate what I consider amounts to good industry practice at the relevant time.

That doesn't mean that in considering what's fair and reasonable, I'll only consider Options actions with these documents in mind. The reports, "Dear CEO" letter and guidance gave non-exhaustive examples of good practice. They didn't say the suggestions given were the limit of what a SIPP operator should do. As the annex to the "Dear CEO" letter notes, what should be done to meet regulatory obligations will depend on the circumstances.

The regulator also issued an alert in 2013 about advisers giving advice to consumers on SIPPs without consideration of the underlying investment to be held in the SIPP. The alert (*"Advising on pension transfers with a view to investing pension monies into unregulated products through a SIPP"*) set out that this type of restricted advice didn't meet regulatory requirements. It said:

"It has been brought to the FSA's attention that some financial advisers are giving advice to customers on pension transfers or pension switches without assessing the advantages and disadvantages of investments proposed to be held within the new pension. In particular, we have seen financial advisers moving customers' retirement savings to self-invested personal pensions (SIPPs) that invest wholly or primarily in high risk, often highly illiquid unregulated investments (some which may be in Unregulated Collective Investment Schemes).

...

Financial advisers using this advice model are under the mistaken impression that this process means they do not have to consider the unregulated investment as part of their advice to invest in the SIPP and that they only need to consider the suitability of the SIPP in the abstract. This is incorrect.

The FSA's view is that the provision of suitable advice generally requires consideration of the other investments held by the customer or, when advice is given on a product which is a vehicle for investment in other products (such as SIPPs and other wrappers), consideration of the suitability of the overall proposition, that is, the wrapper and the expected underlying investments in unregulated schemes."

The alert post-dates the events in this complaint – but, again, it didn't set new standards. It highlighted that advisers using the restricted advice model discussed in the alert generally weren't meeting *existing* regulatory requirements and set out the regulator's concerns about industry practices at the time.

To be clear, I don't say the Principles or the publications obliged Options to ensure the transactions were suitable for Miss B. It's accepted Options wasn't required to give advice to Miss B, and couldn't give advice. And I accept the publications don't alter the meaning of, or the scope of, the Principles. But as I've said above they're evidence of what I consider to have been good industry practice at the relevant time, which would bring about the

outcomes envisaged by the Principles. As Options notes from the FCA's Enforcement Guide, publications of this type "*illustrate ways (but not the only ways) in which a person can comply with the relevant rules*". And so it's fair and reasonable for me to take them into account when deciding this complaint.

Options may argue that any publications or guidance that post-dated the events subject of this complaint don't help to clarify the type of good industry practice that existed at the relevant time. But that doesn't alter my view on what I consider to have been good industry practice at the time. That's because I find that the 2009 Report together with the Principles provide a very clear indication of what Options could and should have done to comply with its regulatory obligations that existed at the relevant time before accepting Miss B's application.

It's important to keep in mind the judge in *Adams v Options* didn't consider the regulatory publications in the context of considering what's fair and reasonable in all the circumstances bearing in mind various matters including the Principles (as part of the regulator's rules) or good industry practice.

And in determining this complaint, I need to consider whether, in accepting Miss B's application to establish a SIPP and to invest in Store First and GAS Verdant, Options complied with its regulatory obligations: to act with due skill, care and diligence; to take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively; to pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly; and to act honestly, fairly and professionally. In doing that, I'm looking to the Principles and the publications listed above to provide an indication of what Options should have done to comply with its regulatory obligations and duties.

Taking account of the factual context of this case, it's my view that in order for Options to meet its regulatory obligations, (under the Principles and COBS 2.1.1R), amongst other things it should have undertaken sufficient due diligence into Douglas Baillie Ltd/the business Douglas Baillie Ltd was introducing and the Store First and GAS Verdant investments *before* deciding to accept Miss B's applications.

Ultimately, what I'll be looking at here is whether Options took reasonable care, acted with due diligence and treated Miss B fairly, in accordance with her best interests. And what I think is fair and reasonable in light of that. And I think the key issue in Miss B's complaint is whether it was fair and reasonable for Options to have accepted her SIPP application and Store First and GAS Verdant investment applications in the first place. So, I need to consider whether Options carried out appropriate due diligence checks on Douglas Baillie Ltd and the Store First and GAS Verdant investments before deciding to accept Miss B's applications.

And the questions I need to consider include whether Options ought to, acting fairly and reasonably to meet its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, have identified that consumers introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or investing in Store First and GAS Verdant were being put at significant risk of detriment. And, if so, whether Options should therefore not have accepted Miss B's application for the Options SIPP and/or Store First and GAS Verdant investments.

The contract between Options and Miss B

Options has made submissions about its contract with Miss B and I've carefully considered everything Options has said about this.

For clarity, my decision is made on the understanding that Options acted purely as a SIPP operator. I don't say Options should (or could) have given advice to Miss B or otherwise have ensured the suitability of the SIPP or the Store First and GAS Verdant investments for her. I accept that Options made it clear to Miss B that it wasn't giving, nor was it able to give, advice and that it played an execution-only role in her SIPP investments. And that forms it appears Miss B signed confirmed, amongst other things, that losses arising as a result of Options acting on her instructions were her responsibility.

I've not overlooked or discounted the basis on which Options was appointed. And my decision on what's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of Miss B's case is made with all of this in mind. So, I've proceeded on the understanding that Options wasn't obliged – and wasn't able – to give advice to Miss B on the suitability of the SIPP or Store First and GAS Verdant investments.

Options' due diligence on introducing adviser Douglas Baillie Ltd

Options had a duty to conduct due diligence and give thought to whether to accept introductions from TPS as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd.

In other complaints, Options said clients were introduced to Options by Douglas Baillie Ltd, an FCA regulated adviser at the relevant time. Options provided us with a print out from the FCA Register dated 28 December 2011 showing *"Basic details"* for *"The Pension Specialist LLP"*. This said its current status was *"Appointed Representative"* effective from 24 May 2011. This print out also showed a list of four individuals involved with *"The Pension Specialist LLP"*. Options has not provided any evidence of the FCA Register searches it completed in relation to Douglas Baillie Ltd or what permissions Douglas Baillie Ltd held.

Options also told us that clients had opted to use Douglas Baillie Ltd as the introducer and Options received a letter of authority to this effect, alongside the SIPP application. That Options satisfied itself that the letter of authority related to the same Douglas Baillie Ltd it had carried out due diligence on. That as far as Options was aware, the client never had any communication with CL&P, and Options had documents to suggest Douglas Baillie Ltd was the sole introducer and adviser. And had the client not first received regulated financial advice, Options would not have accepted the transfer and the client would not have made the Store First and GAS Verdant investments.

Also, in other complaints Options provided our Service with a copy of the Introducer Profile and Introducer Agreement between Options and *"The Pension Specialist LLP"* as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd, signed on 10 October 2011.

Amongst other things, the Introducer Agreement says TPS is responsible for the following:

- Under the *"Providing Advice"* section:
 - *"To evaluate your client's financial circumstances and based on this assess their suitability for what, if any, of the [Options] Pension range is appropriate;"*
 - *"Where a transfer is recommended, all options considered and the advice provided to the client in line with regulatory requirements;"*
- Under the *"Scheme Investments"* section:
 - *"Where your client seeks advice, to provide fully documented advice to your client on the suitability of the Scheme investments, taking account of their financial objectives and attitude to investment risk;"*
 - *"To ensure you have the correct FSA authorisation to provide the investment advice;"*

In other complaints, Options has also provided evidence of some of the discussions it had with TPS, as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd, about the client process and the business it was referring.

From the information that Options has provided about its relationship with TPS, I'm satisfied Options did take *some* steps towards meeting its regulatory obligations and good industry practice. However, I don't think those steps our Service has seen evidence of went far enough or were sufficient to meet Options' regulatory obligations and good industry practice.

I think Options was aware of, or should have identified potential risks of, consumer detriment associated with business introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd, including the following, before it accepted Miss B's application:

- The SIPP business introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd had anomalous features – it appears to have been high risk business, including many DB scheme transfers where monies were ending up invested in unregulated and esoteric investments post-transfer.
- Neither TPS nor any other regulated party was offering the consumers being introduced full regulated advice (that is advice on the transfer or switch to the SIPP, the establishment of the SIPP *and* the intended investment(s)). Instead, advice was being restricted and advice was not being offered on the suitability of the intended investment(s).
- The risk of an unregulated business being involved in the transfer and investment process.

I've set out below some more detail on anomalous features of the business Douglas Baillie Ltd was introducing to Options, and on potential risks of consumer detriment that I think Options either knew about, or ought to have known about, *before* it accepted Miss B's SIPP application. These points overlap, to a degree, and should have been considered by Options cumulatively.

Anomalous features

The type of investments being made by Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers

In a separate complaint, Options told us Douglas Baillie Ltd had introduced 59 clients to Options. And that the majority of clients introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd invested in either Store First and/or GAS Verdant, with the remainder invested in Central and South American forestry investments.

Given this, and based on the evidence I've seen to date, I think it's more likely than not that either all, or the vast majority of, clients introduced to Options by Douglas Baillie Ltd ended up with SIPP monies invested in higher risk non-standard assets like the Store First and GAS Verdant investments.

I think it's fair to say that such investments are highly unlikely to be suitable for the vast majority of retail clients. They will generally only be suitable for a small proportion of people investing for their pension. And I think Options either was aware, or ought reasonably to have been aware, that the type of business Douglas Baillie Ltd was introducing was high risk and therefore carried a potential risk of consumer detriment.

From similar complaints about Options brought to our Service which feature Douglas Baillie Ltd as the advising introducer, I've seen that many of the client SIPP application forms

Douglas Baillie Ltd sent to Options didn't include any details about the intended investment(s). Miss B's SIPP application was one such.

And I note Options has told us that it acts as the administrator only of the SIPP, and clients opened their SIPP and did not specify in their SIPP application what investments they were interested in. So, Options may argue it didn't know what Miss B and other Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced clients were investing in.

But while the 2009 Thematic Review Report made clear that firms acting purely as SIPP operators are not responsible for the SIPP advice given by third parties such as IFAs, it also made clear that *"SIPP operators cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility, and we would expect them to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs."*

And the 2009 Thematic Review Report went on to give the following as examples of measures that SIPP operators could consider, taken from examples of good practice that the regulator had observed and suggestions it had made to firms:

"Routinely recording and reviewing the type (i.e. the nature of the SIPP investment) and size of investments recommended by intermediaries that give advice and introduce clients to the firm, so that potentially unsuitable SIPPs can be identified."

"Being able to identify anomalous investments, e.g. unusually small or large transactions or more 'esoteric' investments such as unquoted shares, together with the intermediary that introduced the business. This would enable the firm to seek appropriate clarification, e.g. from the client or their adviser, if it is concerned about the suitability of what was recommended."

So even if the investments weren't recorded on the application form, Options knew or should have known the investments that were typically being made by Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced clients.

Volume and nature of business introduced

As I say, an example of good practice identified in the FSA's 2009 Thematic Review Report was:

"Routinely recording and reviewing the type (i.e. the nature of the SIPP investment) and size of investments recommended by intermediaries that give advice and introduce clients to the firm, so that potentially unsuitable SIPPs can be identified."

In other complaints, Options told us that Douglas Baillie Ltd made its first introduction to Options on 12 December 2011 and the last on 4 October 2012. That Douglas Baillie Ltd introduced a total of 59 clients to Options, and the number of those that were introduced before one particular client. That Options recorded all commission paid to Douglas Baillie Ltd, and that commission was based on the transfer value with the average commission being 2.11%. And that the majority of clients introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd invested in either Store First and/or GAS Verdant, with the remainder invested in Central and South American forestry investments. Based on this, I'm satisfied Options had access to information about the number and type of introductions that Douglas Baillie Ltd made.

I'm also satisfied Options was aware that Douglas Baillie Ltd was only advising on the transfer, and not the investments. I say this because on 16 March 2012, Ms Hallett at

Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to detail that her understanding of the agreed process included that TPS would only advise on the transfer, as follows:

"The Pensions Specialists (TPS) are providing full advice on transfer of occupational pension schemes to a SIPP (with us), and will provide us copies of TVAS and advice letter.

The Pensions Specialists are appointed as advisers for the purpose of the transfer of existing occupational arrangements and the establishment of the SIPP for which they will be paid from the transfer fund. TPS will get the adviser page of our application form completed and signed by each client.

We will on receipt of the SIPP application log TPS as adviser for the purposes of the transfer and SIPP establishment and keep TPS informed of progress of the transfer and copy them in on correspondence to the client including the welcome letter.

On receipt of the transfer of funds we will advise TPS as well as client

TPS will invoice the scheme for the transfer advice which we will pay

On receipt of the completion of the transaction TPS will send us a letter resigning as adviser which we will record on our systems."

Further, while I've not been provided with a copy of the advice letter and TVAS that Douglas Baillie Ltd prepared in relation to Miss B, I have been provided with a copy of Miss B's SIPP application, which Douglas Baillie Ltd sent to Options on 29 June 2012. The 'Transfers' section of the SIPP application contained a ticked box which read *"Please tick the box to indicate that you have received advice on the transfer of this policy"* and confirmed that *"Douglas Baillie Ltd"* had provided Miss B *"...with advice in respect of this transfer."* And the later 'Financial Adviser Details' section of the SIPP application form again sets out Douglas Baillie Ltd's details and says *"Please note our fee is for advice on transfer only. No advice has been given by us on investment."*

So Miss B's SIPP application form made clear that advice had only been given in relation to the transfer and not in relation to any intended investments. And I've seen that this was also the case with the SIPP application forms in other similar complaints about Options brought to our Service which feature Douglas Baillie Ltd as the advising introducer.

Based on all this, I think Options was on notice from the point in time it first started receiving SIPP application forms from Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers that Douglas Baillie Ltd had not given consumers *any* advice on Store First, GAS Verdant and other higher risk non-standard asset investments.

Options says Douglas Baillie Ltd was an FCA regulated business and at the time of the client's SIPP application, Options was not aware of any reason it shouldn't accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd. But I think that from very early on Options was aware, or ought to have been aware, that TPS (as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd) wasn't a firm that was doing things in a conventional way.

It's unusual for regulated advice firms to be involved in transactions involving pension transfers to invest in high risk esoteric investments, such as the Store First and GAS Verdant investments, where no advice is being given by that firm on the esoteric investments. That's because the risks involved in such investments are unlikely to be fully understood by most people, without obtaining regulated advice. I think it's fair to say that most advice firms decline to be involved in such transactions.

I think this ought to have been a red flag for Options in its dealings with Douglas Baillie Ltd. And I think Options ought to have recognised there was a risk that Douglas Baillie Ltd might be *choosing* to introduce consumers without their having been offered regulated advice by Douglas Baillie Ltd on the unregulated investments that their transfers to Options were being effected to make. I think Options ought to have viewed this as a serious cause for concern – this was a clear and obvious potential risk of consumer detriment in this case.

Finally, I think Options ought to have been concerned that many of Douglas Baillie Ltd's clients were proceeding on an apparently 'insistent client' basis, including Miss B. I think there was reason for Options to be concerned that the advice letters prepared by Douglas Baillie Ltd had been presented by Douglas Baillie Ltd as a formality or as a 'paper exercise' in the process, with the 'insistent client' wording downplayed so that clients given that label remained persuaded that the recommendation overall was to transfer out of their existing scheme.

I've not been provided with a copy of the advice letter prepared for Miss B. But I've seen the advice letters in other complaints brought to our Service about Options where Douglas Baillie Ltd was the advising introducer, and these are all substantially similar in content and suggest the client had already indicated a wish to proceed and included instructions on how to proceed with the application to Options and the transfer out. They read as though Douglas Baillie Ltd was working on the premise that their advice was going to be disregarded. Indeed, I note there is evidence that Douglas Baillie Ltd was keen for these applications from 'insistent clients' to go ahead – when in September 2012 Ms Hallett told Douglas Baillie Ltd *"given the heightened risk with Final Salary Occupational transfers and the volume that seem to be coming through we are not prepared to take them on where the advice is not to do it"*, Douglas Baillie Ltd's response was to convince Ms Hallett to make some concessions.

Alongside the volume of such applicants, I think Options ought to have identified that the tone of the advice letters was inconsistent, and they ought to have been alive to the possibility that the 'insistent client' wording had been included by Douglas Baillie Ltd only in order to limit its responsibility, and not because these retail clients were genuinely insistent. Options ought to have questioned whether Douglas Baillie Ltd, who would only receive commission if the transfer went ahead, was putting its own interests ahead of those of its clients.

And I think these concerns ought to have been even greater in a case like Miss B's where a DB scheme was involved. At the relevant date COBS 19.1.6G stated:

"When advising a retail client who is, or is eligible to be, a member of a defined benefits occupational pension scheme whether to transfer or opt-out, a firm should start by assuming that a transfer or opt-out will not be suitable. A firm should only then consider a transfer or opt-out to be suitable if it can clearly demonstrate, on contemporary evidence, that the transfer or opt-out is in the client's best interests".

While I acknowledge this aims to define the expectation of a regulated financial adviser when determining the suitability of a pension transfer, it emphasises the regulator's concern about the potential detriment such a transaction could expose a consumer to. Given the nature of its business and regulatory status, I'd expect Options to have been familiar with the guidance contained in COBS – even if it didn't apply directly to it. This was a further clear and obvious potential risk of consumer detriment.

The risk of an unregulated business being involved

Options may argue it had no record of CL&P being involved in Miss B's transactions. And Options has made submissions in relation to the checks it made on World Check and the FSA notice regarding Mr Wright. I've considered all this carefully, but I see no need to address these submissions. Because the due diligence Options may or may not have carried out on CL&P before accepting introductions from it isn't the basis on which I'm upholding Miss B's complaint, or something I've relied on in reaching my conclusions.

As I've mentioned above, from the point in time it first started receiving SIPP application forms from Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers, I think Options was on notice that Douglas Baillie Ltd had not given consumers any advice on the intended investments.

Having carefully considered the available evidence, including the SIPP application forms I've seen in this and other complaints against Options where Douglas Baillie Ltd was the introducing adviser, I think it's more likely than not that most, if not all, Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced Options consumers were doing the same thing. By which I mean that application forms to establish an Options SIPP were being submitted for Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced Options consumers recording that advice had been given by Douglas Baillie Ltd on the transfer but not on the investments, that pension monies were then being transferred into the newly established Options SIPPs for those consumers, and, subsequently, the consumers SIPP monies were being invested in Store First, GAS Verdant and other high risk non-standard investments.

To be clear, I don't think it's credible that most, or all, of these Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers were independently determining to invest their pension monies in Store First, GAS Verdant and other high risk non-standard investments without any input from a third party. Given what Options ought reasonably to have identified about the business it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd had it undertaken adequate due diligence, I think this should have been a significant cause for concern for Options and caused it to consider the business it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd very carefully.

I think that Options ought to have been alive to the risk that an unregulated third party might have been involved in promoting the investments to investors, like Miss B, and that consumers were not receiving any regulated advice from Douglas Baillie Ltd on the investments.

I acknowledge that Options says there was nothing in the DISP rules preventing SIPP providers from accepting business from unregulated introducers. But in May 2012, prior to Miss B being introduced to Options, Options had itself chosen to terminate the introducer agreement it had with CL&P, over the concerns Options had about how CL&P operated. Yet two months later, CL&P was in direct contact with Options regarding Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced clients - CL&P emailed Options directly on 25 July 2012 to say that TPS (as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd) was preparing a TVAS for a client and to ask Options to send the client's discharge papers to TPS. The same day, a Pensions Administrator at Options replied to CL&P to confirm Options had done this.

As I've said, Options was obliged to conduct its business with due skill, care and diligence, and to take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively, with adequate risk management systems. And I'm mindful that the regulator's 2009 Thematic Review Report said that *"It is the responsibility of SIPP operators to continuously analyse the individual risks to themselves and their clients, with reference to the six TCF consumer outcomes."* Given all this, I think Options should have been aware and concerned that CL&P was still actively involved in the transfer for a client that Douglas Baillie Ltd had introduced to Options, after Options itself had decided its concerns about how CL&P operated were too great for Options to continue accepting introductions from CL&P.

What fair and reasonable steps should Options have taken, in the circumstances?

Options could simply have concluded that given the potential risks of consumer detriment – which I think were clear and obvious at the time – it should not accept applications from Douglas Baillie Ltd. That would have been a fair and reasonable step to take, in the circumstances. Alternatively, Options could have taken fair and reasonable steps to address the potential risks of consumer detriment.

Requesting information directly from Douglas Baillie Ltd

Given the significant potential risk of consumer detriment I think that, as part of its due diligence on Douglas Baillie Ltd, Options ought to have found out more about how Douglas Baillie Ltd was operating and *before* it accepted Miss B's application. Mindful of the type of introductions I think it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd, and that the clients introduced were not receiving advice on the intended investments, I think it's fair and reasonable to expect Options, in line with its regulatory obligations, to have made some very specific enquiries and obtained information about Douglas Baillie Ltd's business model.

As set out above, the 2009 Thematic Review Report explained that the regulator would expect SIPP operators to have procedures and controls, and for management information to be gathered and analysed, so as to enable the identification of, amongst other things, *"consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs"*. Further, that this could then be addressed in an appropriate way *"...for example by contacting the members to confirm the position, or by contacting the firm giving advice and asking for clarification."*

The October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance gave an example of good practice as:

"Understanding the nature of the introducers' work to establish the nature of the firm, what their business objectives are, the types of clients they deal with, the levels of business they conduct and expect to introduce, the types of investments they recommend and whether they use other SIPP operators. Being satisfied that they are appropriate to deal with."

I think that Options, and *before* it received Miss B's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd, should have checked with Douglas Baillie Ltd about: how it came into contact with potential clients, what agreements it had in place with its clients, whether all of the clients it was introducing were being offered full advice, what its arrangements with any unregulated businesses were, how and why retail clients were interested in making higher risk non-standard investments, whether it was aware of anyone else providing information to clients, how it was able to meet with or speak with all its clients, and what material was being provided to clients by it.

I think obtaining this *type* of information from Douglas Baillie Ltd was a fair and reasonable step for Options to take, in the circumstances, to meet its regulatory obligations and good industry practice.

And, on balance, I think it's more likely than not that if Options *had* checked with Douglas Baillie Ltd and asked the *type* of questions I've mentioned above that Douglas Baillie Ltd would have provided the information sought.

I say this because Douglas Baillie Ltd's email to Options on 18 May 2012 shows that Douglas Baillie Ltd and Options had some discussion in relation to firms Options had refused business from, and Douglas Baillie Ltd was willing to discuss that further - Douglas Baillie Ltd said, *"[TPS Director] mentioned that there were a couple of accounts that you have*

refused business from, as I tend to be closer to the accounts, can you confirm who they are please. This way, I can ensure that [TPS office] are aware of any blacklisted firms and that we can avoid them as well."

But based on the evidence provided to our Service, it wasn't until almost a year after an Introducer Profile and an Introducer Agreement between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd was signed that Options asked Douglas Baillie Ltd about how it came into contact with potential clients. Because on 4 September 2012, Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say *"...it would be helpful for me to understand where you are currently getting the introductions from for the transfer work can you please provide me a list of introducers that you are currently doing transfer advice for to assist me to consider further."*

Then on 6 October 2012, after Options had accepted Miss B's SIPP application, Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say, *"...we need to know on the form who the introducer of the business is to you, I advised you that we had de-listed CLP and would not deal with them but we have some information from a member of your team who said in passing to a member of my team when we were asking about the investments they wanted to transact, that they would check with CLP. If you are sending us business that has been introduced by CLP please stop, we do not want to be associated with them as an introducing firm of business to us as we as I [sic] have said to you before that they offer incentives to the client for transacting the transfer and I understood that you too had concerns, is there any reason why you are still transacting business with them."*

So Options, and *before* it received Miss B's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd, should have decided not to accept business from Douglas Baillie Ltd, given that Options had decided not to accept new business from CL&P.

Making independent checks

I think, in light of what I've said above, it would also have been fair and reasonable for Options, to meet its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, to have taken independent steps to enhance its understanding of the introductions it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd. For example, it could have asked for copies of correspondence relating to the transfer advice.

The 2009 Thematic Review Report said that:

*"...we would expect (SIPP operators) to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs. Such instances could then be addressed in an appropriate way, **for example by contacting the members to confirm the position, or by contacting the firm giving advice and asking for clarification.**"* (bold my emphasis)

So I think it would have been fair and reasonable for Options to speak to some applicants, like Miss B, directly.

I accept Options couldn't give advice. But it had to take reasonable steps to meet its regulatory obligations. And in my view such steps included addressing a potential risk of consumer detriment by speaking to applicants, as this could have provided Options with further insight into Douglas Baillie Ltd's business model. This would have been a fair and reasonable step to take in reaction to the clear and obvious risks of consumer detriment I've mentioned.

And, on balance, I think it's more likely than not that if Options *had* contacted Miss B to 'confirm the position', Miss B would have told Options that it was CL&P who had introduced her to the transfer, the intended investments and to Douglas Baillie Ltd. And as I've said, CL&P was a business that Options had already terminated its introducer agreement with over concerns about how CL&P operated.

Had it taken these fair and reasonable steps, what should Options have concluded?

If Options had undertaken these steps I think it ought to have identified, amongst others, the following risks before it accepted Miss B's application:

- Douglas Baillie Ltd was having business referred to it by introducers, like CL&P, and it was then introducing business to Options.
- Douglas Baillie Ltd wasn't offering the consumers it was introducing to Options (like Miss B) advice on the suitability of the high risk, non-standard and unregulated investments that their Options SIPPs were being established in order to effect.
- A third party might have 'sold' to consumers the idea of transferring pension monies so as to invest in Store First, GAS Verdant and other high risk, non-standard and unregulated investments, before the involvement of any regulated parties.
- The anomalous features I've mentioned above carried a significant risk of consumer detriment.

Each of these in isolation is significant, but cumulatively I think they demonstrate that there was a significant risk of consumer detriment associated with the introductions Options received from Douglas Baillie Ltd. I think that Options ought to have had real concerns that Douglas Baillie Ltd wasn't acting in customers' best interests and wasn't meeting its regulatory obligations.

Options didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Miss B fairly by accepting her application from Douglas Baillie Ltd. To my mind, Options didn't meet its regulatory obligations or good industry practice at the relevant time, and allowed Miss B to be put at significant risk of detriment as a result. Options should have concluded, and *before* it accepted Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd, that it shouldn't accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd. I therefore conclude that it's fair and reasonable in the circumstances to say that Options shouldn't have accepted Miss B's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd at all.

And, to be clear, even if I thought Options had undertaken adequate due diligence on Store First and GAS Verdant, and had acted appropriately in permitting those investments into its SIPPs (which, as I'll explain below, I don't), I'd still consider it fair and reasonable to uphold Miss B's complaint on the basis of what I've already set out above – that Options shouldn't have accepted Miss B's introduction from Douglas Baillie Ltd in the first place.

But for completeness, I've gone on to consider the due diligence that Options carried out on the Store First and GAS Verdant investments.

Options due diligence on the Store First investment

I'm satisfied that, to meet its regulatory obligations when conducting its business, Options was required to consider whether to accept or reject a particular investment, with the Principles in mind.

I think that it's fair and reasonable to expect Options to have looked carefully at the Store First investment *before* permitting it into its SIPPs. To be clear, for Options to accept the Store First investment without carrying out a level of due diligence that was consistent with its regulatory obligations, while asking its customer to accept warnings absolving it of the consequences, wouldn't in my view be fair and reasonable or sufficient. And if Options didn't look at the investment in detail, and if such a detailed look would have revealed that potential investors might be being misled, or that the investment might not be secure or might be fraudulent, it wouldn't in my view be fair or reasonable to say Options had exercised due skill, care and diligence – or treated its customer fairly – by accepting such an investment.

The actions Options took in considering whether to permit the Store First investment into its SIPPs are set out in detail in the background section above, so I won't repeat them here.

In respect of the searches, these were carried out on the promoter of Store First, Harley Scott Holdings Ltd, not Store First itself – perhaps because at that point Store First was just being established. The result of the searches reported that Harley Scott Holdings Ltd had a website address “*dylanharvey.com*”, and had changed its name three times having previously been called Dylan Harvey Group Ltd, Dylan Harvey Ltd and Grangemate Ltd. The report also said County Court Judgments (‘CCJs’) were recorded against the business and that auditors had made adverse comments in the previous three reporting years.

It's not clear what consideration Options gave to this report, after it obtained it. But, in my view, it would have been fair and reasonable for it to have conducted some further basic searches, given there were factors in the report which ought to have been of concern – namely the adverse comments for the previous three years, the CCJs, and the fact the business had recently changed its name.

Had such further basic searches been completed I think it likely they would've revealed that, at the time, Dylan Harvey and one of its directors, Toby Whittaker, were the subject of national press reports, online petitions and proposed legal action, as a result of a failed property investment. It was reported that hundreds of investors had invested in a scheme to develop flats, but the flats hadn't been built and the investors had been unable to recover their money. Those investors were behind the online petitions and proposed legal action.

Options says it obtained copies of Store First's marketing material. It has provided us with copies of this. Again, I accept that potentially this was good practice. In order to correctly understand the nature of the investment, I think it's fair and reasonable to say Options should have reviewed how Store First was marketed to investors – particularly as it was proceeding on the basis that these investments were being made by consumers without regulated advice being provided. Clearly Options thought it was important to look at this material at the time too.

Consistent with its regulatory obligations, Options should not only have obtained the material but should also have given careful consideration to it. The marketing material obtained by Options at the relevant time included the following prominent statements:

“You will receive guaranteed returns from a 6 year lease already in place upon completion, making this a high yielding, hassle-free investment which has been specifically designed to meet the needs of todays (sic) astute investor.”

“You will receive a 6 year lease in place upon completion. The lease produces an excellent return of 8% (guaranteed for the first 2 years) rising to over 12% in years 5 and 6. The lease contains upward-only rental reviews and break clauses for both parties every two years.”

“Guaranteed exit route option.”

It then goes on to set out in a table the returns payable in years 1&2, 3&4 and 5&6 at 8%, 10% and 12%. In the question and answer section the following is included:

“What rental income can I expect?”

Storepod rental starts at £17 per Sq/Ft per annum. The 6 year tenancy/lease in place on your Storepod has fixed upwards only rental reviews and break clauses (for both parties) every 2 years. This produces an 8% yield on your investment within the first two years, this then is predicted to rise to over 10% return in years 3&4 and then surpass 12% return in years 5&6.

Can I easily re-sell my Storepod?

Yes. You can re-sell your Storepod at any time and selling your Storepod couldn't be simpler. Store First Ltd can market your Storepod upon your request. We believe that because Storepods are so competitively priced when new, they will make a very attractive sale proposition in the future. We also expect that many tenants will wish to purchase the Storepod they are using. For example, other self storage PLCs usually achieve rent of between £20.00 - £25.00 per square foot. Our Storepods are costed at a rent of only £17.00 per square foot; once higher rents are achieved the capital value of the Storepod will increase.

Guaranteed exit route?

In year 5, investors have the option to enter the guaranteed buy-back scheme. In this scheme, Store First Management Ltd will guarantee to buy the Storepod back off the investor for the original price paid within the next 5 years. This is a unique offer in the market place and we are happy to be able to offer this exit route to our investors. Most investors are driven to keep the property investment they have purchased and carry on receiving the rental yield produced for years to come, this means only a very limited number of Storepods per centre will ever come onto the resale market, this creates a high sale value and demand for the future”.

The material says the *“figures shown are for illustration purposes”*. But it doesn't contain any type of risk warning, or illustrations of any other returns. No explanation of the guarantees was offered, or the basis of the projected returns – other than Store First's own confidence in its business model and the self-storage marketplace.

I note Options considered a report by ESS. In my view this was of limited value. It was brief and based only on some of the material Options had regard to i.e. the marketing material and lease documents. As a result, I think Options should have found it difficult to reconcile the view reached by ESS with the information available to Options. The report said:

“The following parties are involved in this investment: Seller of the sub-lease: Store First Limited UK Promoter: Harley Scott Holdings Limited No adverse history has been found affecting these parties. A CCJ was issued against the promoter of the scheme however we understand this arose from a disputed invoice which is in the course of being settled. This is any event does not directly impact on the investment”.

This conclusion is inconsistent with the result of Options' own company searches, which reported the adverse comments for the previous three years, the CCJs, and that the business had recently changed its name. The report also makes no comment on the obvious issues with the marketing material. So, I don't think Options should have taken any comfort from the ESS report or attached any significant weight to it.

If Options had completed sufficient due diligence on Store First, what ought it reasonably to have concluded?

The failure of the previous scheme which Dylan Harley/Harley Scott Holdings had been involved in may have been entirely down to market forces. But I think the fact that the company which had approached Options about Store First – and on which Options had conducted searches – had recently been involved in a property investment scheme which had failed, had recently changed its name, and had been subject to a number of adverse comments in succession, following audit, ought to have given Options significant cause for concern. Particularly when it considered the marketing material for Store First.

In my view there were a number of things about the marketing material which ought to have given Options significant cause for concern and led it to have drawn similar conclusions to those later drawn by SSA UK (on the basis of a report by Deloitte LLP) and the Insolvency Service. Namely, that there was a significant risk that potential investors were being misled.

I think, as it had regard to this material, Options could not overlook the fact that Store First appeared to be presenting the investment as one that was assured to provide high and rising returns, was underwritten by guarantees, and offered a high level of liquidity together with a strong prospect of a capital return - despite the fact that there was no investor protection associated with the investment and that, in Options' own words, there was no apparent established market for the investment and the investment was potentially illiquid.

Store First had no proven track record for investors and so Options couldn't be certain that the investment operated as claimed. Options should also have been concerned about a guarantee offered by a new business with no track record (and promoted by a business with a questionable one).

I think, in light of this, Options should have been concerned that consumers may have been misled or did not properly understand the investment they intended to make. Consumers could easily have been given the impression, from the marketing material, that they were assured of high returns with little or no risk and would easily be able to sell their investment when they wished to. Such an impression was clearly misleading.

From the evidence I've seen I think the information Store First was publishing *before* Miss B's Options monies were invested with it, including marketing material available through its website, gave rise to a significant risk that potential investors were being misled by Store First. And I think Options ought to have identified this *before* permitting the Store First investment into its SIPPs. This is a clear point of concern, which I think Options ought reasonably to have identified *before* it accepted Miss B's application to invest in Store First.

In my opinion, the issues I've identified above should have, when considered objectively, put Options on notice from the beginning that there was a significant risk of consumer detriment. And, without more evidence to ensure the investment was an appropriate one to permit within its SIPPs, I'm satisfied that Options shouldn't have accepted the Store First investment.

Had Options done what it ought to have done, and drawn reasonable conclusions from what it knew or ought to have known, I think that it ought to have concluded there was a

significant risk of consumer detriment if it accepted the Store First investment into its SIPPs and that the Store First investment wasn't acceptable for its SIPPs.

As such, and based on the available evidence, I don't think Options undertook appropriate steps or drew reasonable conclusions from the information that I'm satisfied would have been available to it, had it undertaken adequate due diligence into the Store First investment *before* it accepted that investment into its SIPPs. I don't think Options met its regulatory obligations and, in accepting Miss B's application to invest in Store First, it allowed Miss B's funds to be put at significant risk.

To be clear, I don't say Options should have identified all the issues the SSA UK press release set out or to have foreseen the issues which later came to light with Store First. I only say that, based on the information available to Options at the relevant time, it should have drawn a similar overall conclusion – that there was a significant risk that potential investors were being misled. I'm satisfied, on a fair and reasonable basis, that a significant risk of consumer detriment ought to have been apparent from the information available to Options at the time. And I do think that appropriate checks would have revealed issues which were, in and of themselves, sufficient basis for Options to have declined to accept the Store First investment in its SIPPs *before* Miss B invested in it. And it's the failure of Options' due diligence that's resulted in Miss B being treated unfairly and unreasonably.

There's a difference between accepting or rejecting a particular investment for a SIPP and advising on its suitability for the individual investor. I accept Options wasn't expected to, nor was it able to, give advice to Miss B on the suitability of the SIPP and/or Store First investment for her personally. To be clear, I'm not making a finding that Options should have assessed the suitability of the Store First investment for Miss B. I accept Options had no obligation to give advice to Miss B, or to ensure otherwise the suitability of an investment for her.

And I'm also not saying that Options shouldn't have allowed the Store First investment into its SIPPs because it was high risk. My finding isn't that Options should have concluded that Miss B wasn't a candidate for high risk investments or that an investment in Store First was unsuitable for Miss B. Instead, it's my fair and reasonable opinion that there were things Options knew or ought to have known about the Store First investment and how it was being marketed which ought to have led Options to conclude it wouldn't be consistent with its regulatory obligations or good practice to allow it into its SIPPs. And that Options failed to act with due skill, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Miss B fairly by accepting the Store First investments into her SIPP.

Acting fairly and reasonably to investors (including Miss B), Options should have concluded that it wouldn't permit the Store First investment to be held in its SIPPs *at all*. And I'm satisfied that it's more likely than not that Miss B's pension monies were only transferred to Options so as to effect the Store First and GAS Verdant investments. So, I think it's likely that if Options hadn't permitted the Store First investment to be held in its SIPPs at all, Miss B's pension monies wouldn't have been transferred to Options. And further, that Miss B wouldn't then have suffered the losses she's suffered as a result of transferring to Options and investing in Store First.

Options due diligence on the GAS Verdant investment

As I've said, I'm satisfied that, to meet its regulatory obligations when conducting its business, Options was required to consider whether to accept or reject a particular investment, with the Principles in mind.

Options says our Service has concluded that Options shouldn't have allowed the GAS Verdant investment, simply because it was high risk and because it was an investment often made alongside Store First. For clarity, those are not my reasons for concluding that Options shouldn't have allowed the GAS Verdant investment into its SIPPs. My reasons are as follows.

I think it's fair and reasonable to expect Options to have looked carefully at the GAS Verdant investment *before* permitting it into its SIPPs. To be clear, for Options to accept the GAS Verdant investment without carrying out a level of due diligence that was consistent with its regulatory obligations, while asking its customer to accept warnings absolving it of the consequences, wouldn't in my view be fair and reasonable or sufficient. And if Options didn't look at the investment in detail, and if such a detailed look would have revealed that potential investors might be being misled, or that the investment might not be secure or might be fraudulent, it wouldn't in my view be fair or reasonable to say Options had exercised due skill, care and diligence – or treated its customer fairly – by accepting such an investment.

GAS Verdant was an unregulated, esoteric, high risk investment. It took the form of 'land purchase contracts' which involved a company and land based abroad. Crops were to be planted on the plots, and the objective was to provide an income to investors through the sale of those crops and capital growth through the sale of the plot of land. This type of investment involved significant risks and a lack of protections.

To date, Options has provided little information about what checks it carried out on the GAS Verdant investment, other than to say it reviewed investment information, company background checks and also an independent report dated 7 October 2010 from ESS. Options makes no reference to what conclusions it drew from this information, other than to say these checks were sufficient to conclude that this investment was suitable to be held within a UK pension scheme.

In my view, the report by ESS was brief and based on some of the material Options already had regard to in relation to GAS Verdant. That said, I'm satisfied Options should have been concerned by some of the information the report highlighted. In particular, the report said (with my emphasis):

- *"Description of investment*
Beneficial ownership of Australian farmland, purchased in seven hectare plots."
- *"Is there a market for buying or selling the investment?*
There is no established market for buying or selling the beneficial ownership,
although the land can be sold or assigned at any time subject to a buyer being found."
- *"How liquid is the investment and in any event, could the investment be liquidated within two years?*
The investment is predicted to have an eight year lifespan at which point it is anticipated the farmland will be sold and the proceeds, less fees, will be distributed to investors.
Therefore the investment should be viewed as illiquid *subject to the comments above."*
- *"Does the proposed investment offer any form of investor protection?*
The investment is unregulated so no investor protection will apply."
- *"Based on the information available, is the proposed investment cleared to be held in a member-directed pension?*
Yes."

- *“Disclaimer
The process undertaken by Enhance Support Solutions Limited seeks to identify whether the investment is likely to be acceptable based on HMRC rules as set by the Finance Act 2004 and subsequent amendments.”*

So, the report only sought to identify whether the investment was likely to be acceptable based on HMRC rules – it did not seek to identify risk of consumer detriment. This is likely why it was brief. Nonetheless, Options ought to have seen from the report that there was a significant risk of consumer detriment due to the illiquid and unregulated nature of the investment, and there being no established market for buying and selling the investment. Therefore, I don’t think Options should have taken any comfort from the report.

As the FCA has noted, it is difficult to complete due diligence for non-standard overseas investment schemes where firms do not always have access to local qualified legal professionals or accountants. Consistent with its regulatory obligations, Options should not only have obtained adequate material in order to make a properly informed decision about whether to permit the GAS Verdant investment into its SIPP, but it should also have given careful consideration to that material. And I’ve seen no evidence to suggest Options went beyond basic checks with the GAS Verdant investment.

Options says it provided Miss B with numerous risk warnings regarding her chosen investments, including the warnings in the Member Declaration & Indemnity forms they signed. That these forms were very clear regarding what the investments were and, crucially, that they were high risk.

But there is no reasoning given as to why Options thought such an unusual and high risk venture was appropriate to hold in its SIPP. As I said above, Options should not only have carried out the searches on the investment but also given careful consideration to what they revealed so that it could be satisfied the investment was real and secure and operated as claimed and could be independently valued.

And in any case, I don’t think it would be fair and reasonable to conclude that including warnings in a Member Declaration & Indemnity meant Options could simply ignore its own regulatory obligations and all red flags to proceed with permitting the investment into its SIPP – and I’ll return to this point.

If Options had completed sufficient due diligence on GAS Verdant, what ought it reasonably to have concluded?

In a separate complaint, a consumer has provided a copy of the GAS Verdant marketing brochure he says CL&P provided to him in 2012. The brochure itself is undated, but the data it contains runs up to October 2010 and it’s reasonable to think that an investment being considered for acceptance within SIPP would have associated marketing material. So on balance, I’m satisfied that this marketing brochure, or information very similar to that which it contained, was more likely than not available to Options at the time it was considering whether to permit the GAS Verdant investment into its SIPP. And it was certainly available to Options at the time Miss B was applying to invest her Options SIPP monies into GAS Verdant, particularly given the GAS Verdant information sheet dated 2011 Miss B was provided with in 2012, which she shared with us in response to the provisional decision.

In my view there were a number of things about the marketing material which ought to have given Options significant cause for concern. Namely, that there was a significant risk that potential investors were being misled.

I think, as it had regard to this marketing material, Options could not overlook the fact that the GAS Verdant investment appeared to be presented as one that was assured to provide high and rising returns, and offered a high level of liquidity together with a strong prospect of a capital return - despite the fact that there was no investor protection associated with the investment and that, as ESS's report to Options had stated, the investment was illiquid and unregulated, and there was no established market for buying and selling the investment.

Further, the GAS Verdant marketing brochure says GAS "*...is one of the first companies to specialise in modern agronomy investments for a wider public...*" Based on this, I'm satisfied GAS Verdant didn't have a proven track record for retail investors, and so Options couldn't be certain that the investment operated for them as claimed.

In light of all this, Options should have been concerned that consumers may have been misled or did not properly understand the investment they intended to make. Consumers could easily have been given the impression, from the marketing material, that they were assured of high returns with little or no risk and would easily be able to sell their investment when they wished to. Such an impression was clearly misleading.

From the evidence I've seen, I think the information in the GAS Verdant marketing material published *before* Miss B's Options monies were invested with it gave rise to a significant risk that potential investors were being misled by GAS Verdant. And I think Options ought to have identified this *before* permitting the GAS Verdant investment into its SIPPs. This is a clear point of concern, which I think Options ought reasonably to have identified *before* it accepted Miss B's application to invest in GAS Verdant.

In my opinion, the issues I've identified above should have, when considered objectively, put Options on notice that there was a significant risk of consumer detriment. And, without more evidence to ensure the investment was an appropriate one to permit within its SIPPs, I'm satisfied that Options shouldn't have accepted the GAS Verdant investment.

In my opinion it's fair and reasonable to say that Options ought to have concluded there was an obvious risk of consumer detriment here. All in all, I am satisfied that Options ought to have had significant concerns about the GAS Verdant investment from the beginning. And I think such concerns ought to have been a red flag for Options when it was considering whether to accept the GAS Verdant investments into its SIPPs. Such concerns emphasise the importance of sufficient due diligence being undertaken *before* investments are accepted and *before* SIPP investors monies are invested.

Had Options done what it ought to have done, and drawn reasonable conclusions from what it knew or ought to have known, I think that it ought to have concluded there was a significant risk of consumer detriment if it accepted the GAS Verdant investment into its SIPPs and that the GAS Verdant investment wasn't acceptable for its SIPPs.

As such, and based on the available evidence, I don't think Options undertook appropriate steps or drew reasonable conclusions from the information that I'm satisfied would have been available to it, had it undertaken adequate due diligence into the GAS Verdant investment *before* it accepted that investment into its SIPPs. I don't think Options met its regulatory obligations and, in accepting Miss B's application to invest in GAS Verdant, it allowed Miss B's funds to be put at significant risk.

To reiterate, there's a difference between accepting or rejecting a particular investment for a SIPP and advising on its suitability for the individual investor. I accept that Options wasn't expected to, nor was it able to, give advice to Miss B on the suitability of the SIPP and/or GAS Verdant investment for her personally. To be clear, I'm not making a finding that Options should have assessed the suitability of the GAS Verdant investment for Miss B. I

accept Options had no obligation to give advice to Miss B, or to ensure otherwise the suitability of an investment for her.

And I'm also not saying that Options shouldn't have allowed the GAS Verdant investment into its SIPPs because it was high risk. My finding isn't that Options should have concluded that Miss B wasn't a candidate for high risk investments or that an investment in GAS Verdant was unsuitable for Miss B. Instead, it's my fair and reasonable opinion that there were things Options knew or ought to have known about the GAS Verdant investment and how it was being marketed which ought to have led Options to conclude it wouldn't be consistent with its regulatory obligations or good practice to allow it into its SIPPs. And that Options failed to act with due skill, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Miss B fairly by accepting the GAS Verdant investments into her SIPP.

I think the fair and reasonable conclusion based on the evidence available is that Options shouldn't have accepted Miss B's application to invest in GAS Verdant. In my opinion, it ought to have concluded that it would not be consistent with its obligations to do so. To my mind, Options didn't meet its regulatory obligations or good industry practice at the relevant time, and allowed Miss B to be put at significant risk of detriment as a result.

Acting fairly and reasonably to investors (including Miss B), Options should have concluded that it wouldn't permit the GAS Verdant investment to be held in its SIPPs *at all*. And I'm satisfied that it's more likely than not that Miss B's pension monies were only transferred to Options so as to bring about the Store First and GAS Verdant investments. So, I think it's more likely than not that if Options hadn't permitted the GAS Verdant investment to be held in its SIPPs at all that Miss B's pension monies wouldn't have been transferred to Options. Further, that Miss B wouldn't then have suffered the losses she's suffered as a result of transferring to Options and investing in GAS Verdant.

Did Options act fairly and reasonably in proceeding with Miss B's instructions?

Options says it was the client's decision to proceed on an execution-only basis and Options made this clear to them. Options has also made the point that COBS 11.2.19R obliged it to execute investment instructions. It effectively says that once the SIPP has been established, it is required to execute the specific instructions of its client. Before considering this point, I think it is important for me to reiterate that, it was not fair and reasonable for Options to have accepted Miss B's SIPP application from Douglas Baillie Ltd in the first place. So in my opinion, Miss B's SIPP should not have been established and the opportunity to execute investment instructions or proceed in reliance on an indemnity should not have arisen at all.

In any event, Options' argument about having to execute the transaction as a result of COBS 11.2.19R was considered and rejected by the judge in BBSAL. In that case Jacobs J said:

"The heading to COBS 11.2.1R shows that it is concerned with the manner in which orders are to be executed: i.e. on terms most favourable to the client. This is consistent with the heading to COBS 11.2 as a whole, namely: "Best execution". The text of COBS 11.2.1R is to the same effect. The expression "when executing orders" indicates that it is looking at the moment when the firm comes to execute the order, and the way in which the firm must then conduct itself. It is concerned with the "mechanics" of execution; a conclusion reached, albeit in a different context, in Bailey & Anr v Barclays Bank [2014] EWHC 2882 (QB), paras [34] – [35]. It is not addressing an anterior question, namely whether a particular order should be executed at all. I agree with the FCA's submission that COBS 11.2 is a section of the Handbook concerned with the method of execution of client orders, and is designed to achieve a high quality of execution. It presupposes that there is an order being executed, and refers to the factors that must be taken into account when deciding how best to execute

the order. It has nothing to do with the question of whether or not the order should be accepted in the first place.”

Therefore, I don't think Options' argument on this point is relevant to its obligations under the Principles to decide whether or not to accept an application to open a SIPP in the first place or to execute the instruction to make the investments i.e. to proceed with the application.

Was it fair and reasonable in all the circumstances for Options to proceed with Miss B's application?

For the reasons given above, I think Options shouldn't have accepted Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and I also think it shouldn't have accepted the Store First and GAS Verdant investments into her SIPP. So things shouldn't have got beyond that.

And, to be clear, even if I thought Options had undertaken adequate due diligence on Douglas Baillie Ltd and acted appropriately in accepting Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd (which, as I've explained, I don't), I'd still consider it fair and reasonable to uphold Miss B's complaint on the basis that Options didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Miss B fairly, by accepting the Store First and GAS Verdant investments into her SIPP.

I make this point here to emphasise that while I've concluded *both* that Options shouldn't have accepted Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and also that it shouldn't have accepted her applications to invest in Store First and GAS Verdant, if I had only reached the conclusions I've set out above on one of those aspects and not also gone on to reach findings on the other aspect for completeness, I'd still consider it fair and reasonable in all the circumstances to uphold this complaint. That's because Options didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Miss B fairly by accepting her business from Douglas Baillie Ltd. And because, separately, Options also didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Miss B fairly, by accepting the Store First and GAS Verdant investments into her SIPP. And to my mind, Options didn't meet its regulatory obligations or good industry practice at the relevant times, and allowed Miss B to be put at significant risk of detriment as a result.

Further, in my view it's fair and reasonable to say that just having Miss B sign declarations, wasn't an effective way for Options to meet its regulatory obligations to treat her fairly, given the concerns Options ought to have had about the business being introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd and the Store First and GAS Verdant investments.

Options knew Miss B had signed forms intended to acknowledge, amongst other things, her awareness of some of the risks involved with investing and to indemnify Options against losses that arose from acting on her instructions. And, in my opinion, relying on the contents of such forms when Options knew, or ought to have known, that both the type of business it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd and allowing the Store First and GAS Verdant investments to be held within its SIPPs would put investors at significant risk, wasn't the fair and reasonable thing to do. Having identified the risks I've mentioned above, I think the fair and reasonable thing for Options to do would have been to decline to accept Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and to refuse to accept the Store First and GAS Verdant investments in her SIPP.

The Principles exist to ensure regulated firms treat their clients fairly. And I don't think the paperwork Miss B signed meant that Options could ignore its duty to treat her fairly. To be clear, I'm satisfied that indemnities contained within the contractual documents don't absolve, nor do they attempt to absolve, Options of its regulatory obligations to treat customers fairly when deciding whether to accept or reject investments or business.

So, I'm satisfied that Miss B's Options SIPP shouldn't have been established and her Options monies shouldn't have been invested in the Store First and GAS Verdant holdings. And that the opportunity for Options to execute investment instructions to invest Miss B's monies in Store First and GAS Verdant or to proceed in reliance on an indemnity and/or risk disclaimers shouldn't have arisen at all. I'm firmly of the view that it wasn't fair and reasonable in all the circumstances for Options to accept Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd or for it to accept her applications to invest in Store First and GAS Verdant.

Is it fair to ask Options to pay Miss B compensation in the circumstances?

The involvement of other parties

In this decision I'm considering Miss B's complaint about Options. But I accept other parties were involved in the transactions complained about, including Douglas Baillie Ltd and CL&P.

Miss B pursued an FSCS claim against Douglas Baillie Ltd but the evidence provided to me suggests the FSCS did not progress this claim because Options didn't provide it with the information it had asked it for, and so the FSCS has not paid Miss B any compensation. So it is my understanding that here, it is not necessary for Miss B to have a reassignment of rights in order to pursue a complaint against Options. And neither Options or Miss B have disputed my understanding.

The DISP rules set out that when an Ombudsman's determination includes a money award, then that money award may be such amount as the Ombudsman considers to be fair compensation for financial loss, whether or not a Court would award compensation (DISP 3.7.2R).

In my opinion it's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this case to hold Options accountable for its own failure to comply with its regulatory obligations, good industry practice and to treat Miss B fairly.

The starting point therefore, is that it would be fair to require Options to pay Miss B compensation for the loss she's suffered as a result of its failings. I've carefully considered if there's any reason why it wouldn't be fair to ask Options to compensate Miss B for her loss.

I accept that other parties, including Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or CL&P, might have some responsibility for initiating the course of action that led to Miss B's loss. However, I'm satisfied that it's also the case that if Options had complied with its own distinct regulatory obligations as a SIPP operator, the arrangement for Miss B wouldn't have come about in the first place, and the loss she's suffered could have been avoided.

I want to make clear that I've taken everything Options has said into consideration. And it's my view that it's appropriate and fair in the circumstances for Options to compensate Miss B to the full extent of the financial losses she's suffered due to Options' failings. And, having carefully considered everything, I don't think that it would be appropriate or fair in the circumstances to reduce the compensation amount that Options is liable to pay to Miss B.

Miss B taking responsibility for her own investment decisions

In reaching my conclusions in this case I've thought about section 5(2)(d) of the FSMA (now section 1C). This section requires the FCA, in securing an appropriate degree of protection for consumers, to have regard to, amongst other things, the general principle that consumers should take responsibility for their own investment decisions.

I've considered this point carefully and I'm satisfied that it wouldn't be fair or reasonable to say Miss B's actions mean she should bear the loss arising as a result of Options' failings.

In my view, if Options had acted in accordance with its regulatory obligations and good industry practice it shouldn't have accepted Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd or accepted her applications to invest in Store First or GAS Verdant at all. That should have been the end of the matter – if either of those things had happened, I'm satisfied the arrangement for Miss B wouldn't have come about in the first place, and the loss she's suffered could have been avoided.

As I've made clear, Options needed to carry out appropriate initial and ongoing due diligence on Douglas Baillie Ltd and the Store First and GAS Verdant investments, and reach the right conclusions. I think it failed to do this. And just having Miss B sign forms containing declarations wasn't an effective way of Options meeting its obligations, or of escaping liability where it failed to meet its obligations.

Douglas Baillie Ltd was a regulated firm who had advised Miss B on her pension transfer. I'm satisfied that Miss B trusted Douglas Baillie Ltd to act in her best interests. Miss B also then used the services of a regulated personal pension provider, Options.

I've carefully considered what Options has said about clients being aware of the risks - that they signed documents confirming the Store First and GAS Verdant investments were high risk. And that the client proceeding on an 'insistent client' basis, and chose to accept a cash incentive and not disclose it to Options, thereby contributing to the loss they suffered.

I've already explained why I think Options ought to have been concerned about Miss B proceeding on an insistent client basis. And as I explain below, I don't agree that the evidence we've seen to date supports the contention that it's more likely than not that Miss B understood the Store First and GAS Verdant investments were high risk. But, in any eventuality, these are secondary points because, as mentioned above, if Options had acted in accordance with its regulatory obligations and good industry practice I'm satisfied the arrangement for Miss B wouldn't have come about in the first place.

So, overall, I'm satisfied that in the circumstances, for all the reasons given, it's fair and reasonable to say Options should compensate Miss B for the loss she's suffered. I don't think it would be fair to say in the circumstances that Miss B should suffer the loss because she ultimately instructed the transactions to be effected.

Had Options declined Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd, would the transactions complained about still have been effected elsewhere?

Miss B says at the time of the 2012 events, she was contacted about possible investments after browsing on the internet and that she talked to a number of people about investments. Therefore, Options may argue it's possible that Miss B provided her contact details in order to be contacted by a firm like CL&P or Douglas Baillie Ltd.

However, it doesn't automatically follow that Miss B wanted to open a SIPP, transfer her DB scheme benefits into an Options SIPP and invest her SIPP monies in Store First and GAS Verdant no matter what. And Miss B has also told us that at that time, she was given the impression that the risk was minimal regardless of what was outlined in the paperwork, that investors normally have a good return overall, that she was guaranteed a 9% return, and that while the value of investments can go down as well as up, security measures were in place to minimise the risk of that happening.

In any case, I've thought carefully about what Miss B would likely have done if Options had told her it was rejecting her business.

Based on Miss B's testimony, I think her pension monies were transferred to Options in order to make the Store First and GAS Verdant investments. And that's supported by emails I've seen that CL&P sent to consumers in other complaints where CL&P was in contact with consumers and passed them to Douglas Baillie Ltd for regulated advice, and where Douglas Baillie Ltd then introduced the consumer to Options. The emails CL&P sent to the consumer soon after initial contact said:

- *"We can introduce you to the investment product and to the SIPP Company if you are using your pension to invest."*
- *"We spoke a little while ago in relation to your pension and the possibility of moving it into a SIPP (Self Invested Personal Pension) with a commercial property investment and an extra guaranteed return available."*
- *"Our clients keep the full value of the funds in an FSA regulated Self Invested Personal Pension or SIPP for short."*
- *"They continue growing this by approximately 10% per year, in an HMRC & Pensions Authority approved and regulated environment."*
- *"They also have a guaranteed return of 8% for the first year which comes at the start of the investment, this is in approximately 16 weeks when the process of transfer and investment has been completed and not at the end of the first year as your [sic] would typically expect."*

Further, it's also supported by copies of the advice letters I've seen that TPS prepared for other consumers who have brought similar complaints to our Service. TPS sent copies of these advice letters to Options alongside the SIPP application form, and they contain the following wording:

"It has been confirmed to me that you wish to transfer your benefits into a SIPP rather than a fully insured plan as you wish to make an investment with your pension that would not be available via a fully insured plan."

Options says that if it had refused to process Miss B's application for any reason, Miss B would've likely made the same investment via a different SIPP provider in order to either secure the incentive payment from CL&P or release funds. So she would have suffered the same loss.

I acknowledge that Miss B has told us that if Options had refused to allow the investments, she probably would have looked elsewhere to improve her pension pot. But Miss B has told us that she hasn't accessed any benefits from her pension and that she didn't need to access her pensions funds immediately at that time, as she'd been made redundant and had some capital, and was too young to retire. So I'm satisfied a transfer wouldn't have been effected elsewhere at the time, and with monies not being withdrawn being invested in holdings that weren't Store First and GAS Verdant, just so as to access a pension commencement lump sum and/or pension income.

And I don't think it's fair and reasonable to say that Options shouldn't compensate Miss B for her loss on the basis of speculation that another SIPP operator would have made the same mistakes as I've found Options did. I think it's fair instead to assume that another SIPP provider would have complied with its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, and therefore wouldn't have accepted Miss B's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd or permitted the Store First and GAS Verdant investments into its SIPPs.

In the circumstances, I'm satisfied it's fair and reasonable to conclude that if Options had refused to accept Miss B's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or hadn't permitted the Store First and GAS Verdant investments in its SIPPs, the transactions wouldn't still have gone ahead and Miss B would have retained her monies in her DB scheme.

And had Options explained to Miss B why it refused to accept her application from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or hadn't permitted the Store First and GAS Verdant investments in its SIPPs, I think it very unlikely Miss B would've tried to find another SIPP operator to accept the business.

In *Adams v Options SIPP*, the judge found that Mr Adams would have proceeded with the transaction regardless. HHJ Dight says (at paragraph 32):

"The Claimant knew that it was a high risk and speculative investment but nevertheless decided to proceed with it, because of the cash incentive."

In Miss B's case, Options says Miss B understood the investments were high risk. Whereas Miss B says she was given the impression that the risk was minimal regardless of what was outlined in the paperwork, that she was guaranteed a 9% return, and she was told that while the value of investments can go down as well as up, security measures were in place to minimise the risk of that happening.

I've carefully considered what Options has said about clients being aware of the risks – that Options provided the client with numerous risk warnings regarding their chosen investments, including the warnings in the Member Declaration & Indemnity forms they signed, and these forms were very clear regarding what the investments were and that they were high risk.

But I think the information Miss B received from CL&P at the start regarding the Store First and GAS Verdant investments presented them, in detail, as providing high returns with little to no risk. And I'm mindful that the Member Declaration & Indemnity forms given to Miss B many months later read *"I am fully aware that this investment is an Alternative Investment and as such is High Risk and / or Speculative."* The forms appear to be generic, by which I mean they appear to be forms that could be used for a number of investments and don't appear to be forms that are bespoke to either the Store First investment or the GAS Verdant investment. So I can see why the term *"and / or"* might have been used. But I don't agree the contents of the forms support the contention that Miss B understood the Store First and GAS Verdant investments were high risk. So in this case, I'm not persuaded that Miss B proceeded in the knowledge that the investments she was making were high risk.

I'm also not persuaded that Miss B was determined to move forward with the transaction in order to take advantage of a cash incentive. Miss B has confirmed she received a payment which she'd thought was like a bonus, and which she thinks she spent on her family's university fees or medical insurance. Options hasn't provided any comments or evidence regarding what the amount of this payment was, but Miss B has provided a copy of a letter dated April 2012 which says this payment was estimated to be £6,080. So, based on the evidence provided to me, I'm satisfied this payment was approximately £6,080.

I'm not persuaded that Miss B had a pressing need for this £6,080 payment, as she says she already had capital available to her at that time. On balance, I'm satisfied that Miss B, unlike Mr Adams, wasn't eager to complete the transaction for reasons other than securing the best pension for herself.

Having carefully considered all of the circumstances, I'm satisfied it's fair and reasonable to

conclude that if Options had refused to accept Miss B's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or to permit Store First and GAS Verdant investments in its SIPP, the transactions this complaint concerns wouldn't still have gone ahead.

In conclusion

Options suggests in a separate complaint that the complaint shouldn't be upheld because the FCA visited Options and approved its due diligence procedures in September 2011, before Options accepted the client's SIPP application. However, Options hasn't provided any evidence to support this argument. And ultimately, what I've looked at here is whether Options took reasonable care, acted with due diligence and treated Miss B fairly, in accordance with her best interests. And what I think is fair and reasonable in light of that.

And taking everything into consideration, I think that in the circumstances of this case it's fair and reasonable for me to conclude that Options should have decided not to accept business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or to accept the Store First and GAS Verdant investments to be held in its SIPP *before* it had received Miss B's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd. I conclude that if Options hadn't accepted Miss B's introduction from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or the Store First and GAS Verdant investments to be held in its SIPP, Miss B wouldn't have established an Options SIPP, transferred her DB Scheme monies into it or invested in Store First and GAS Verdant.

For the reasons I've set out, I also think it's fair and reasonable to direct Options to compensate Miss B for the loss she's suffered as a result of Options accepting her business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and permitting her to invest her Options monies in Store First and GAS Verdant. I say this having given careful consideration to the *Adams v Options* judgments but also bearing in mind that my role is to reach a decision that's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of the case having taken account of all relevant considerations.

Overall, I think it's fair and reasonable to direct Options to pay Miss B compensation in the circumstances. While I accept that other parties might have some responsibility for initiating the course of action that's led to Miss B's loss, I consider that Options failed to comply with its own regulatory obligations and didn't put a stop to the transactions proceeding by declining to accept Miss B's applications when it had the opportunity to do so. And I'm satisfied that Miss B wouldn't have established the Options SIPP, transferred monies in from her DB scheme, or invested in Store First and/or GAS Verdant if it hadn't been for Options' failings.

In my view, in considering what fair compensation looks like in this case, it's reasonable to make an award against Options that requires it to compensate Miss B for the full measure of her loss.

I've seen nothing to suggest Miss B has previously sold any of her Store First or GAS Verdant holdings. But whether or not Miss B has previously managed to sell any of her Store First or GAS Verdant holdings doesn't alter my opinion that, but for Options' failings, Miss B's pension monies wouldn't have been transferred to Options and invested in Store First and GAS Verdant. Further, and from a redress perspective, I'm satisfied that Options will need to check whether there are still any Store First and GAS Verdant investments held in Miss B's SIPP when it's performing the first step of the redress calculation I've set out below.

Putting things right

My aim is to return Miss B to the position she'd now be in but for what I consider to be Options' failure to carry out adequate due diligence checks before accepting Miss B's

business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and before permitting Miss B to invest her Options monies in Store First and GAS Verdant.

Options should calculate fair compensation by comparing the current position to the position Miss B would be in if she'd not transferred from her DB scheme. In summary, Options should:

1. Take ownership of the Store First and GAS Verdant investments if possible.
2. Calculate and pay compensation for the loss Miss B's pension provisions have suffered as a result of Options accepting her applications.
3. Pay Miss B £750 for the distress and inconvenience she's suffered.

I explain how Options should carry out these steps in further detail below.

1. Take ownership of the investments if possible.

In order for the SIPP to be closed and further SIPP fees to be prevented, any remaining Store First and GAS Verdant investments need to be removed from Miss B's SIPP. To do this, Options should calculate an amount it's willing to accept for Miss B's Store First and GAS Verdant investments and pay that sum into Miss B's SIPP and take ownership of the Store First and GAS Verdant investments. Any sums paid into the SIPP to purchase the Store First and GAS Verdant investments will then make up part of the current actual value of the SIPP.

If Options is unable to purchase the Store First and GAS Verdant investments, the actual value of any Store First and GAS Verdant investments it doesn't purchase should be assumed to be nil for the purposes of the redress calculation. To be clear, this would include their being given a nil value for the purposes of ascertaining the current value of Miss B's SIPP.

I think this is fair because I think it's unlikely the Store First and GAS Verdant investments will have any significant realisable value in the future. Further, I understand Miss B has the option of returning her Store First investments to the freeholder for nil consideration. And that should assist Miss B to close her SIPP if Options is unable to take ownership of her Store First investments.

In the event the Store First and GAS Verdant investments remain in the SIPP, as Options is unable to purchase them and Miss B decides not to transfer them to the freeholder, Miss B should be aware that she will be liable for all future costs associated with the investments such as the ongoing SIPP fees, business rates, ground rent and any other charges. She should also be aware it's unlikely she will be able to make a further complaint about these costs.

2. Calculate and pay compensation for the loss Miss B's pension provisions have suffered as a result of Options accepting her applications.

A fair and reasonable outcome would be for Options to put Miss B, as far as possible, into the position she'd now be in if it hadn't accepted her application from Douglas Baillie Ltd. As explained above, had this occurred I consider it's more likely than not Miss B would have remained in her DB Scheme.

Options must therefore undertake a redress calculation in line with the rules for calculating redress for non-compliant pension transfer advice, as detailed in policy statement PS22/13 and set out in the regulator's handbook in DISP App 4: <https://www.handbook.fca.org.uk/handbook/DISP/App/4/?view=chapter>.

This calculation should be carried out using the most recent financial assumptions in line with PS22/13 and DISP App 4. In accordance with the regulator's expectations, this should be undertaken or submitted to an appropriate provider promptly following receipt of notification of Miss B's acceptance of the decision.

Account should also be taken of the estimated £6,080 'referral fee' payment paid out to Miss B. This can be taken into account in the calculation by way of treating it as an income withdrawal payment paid at the outset.

If the redress calculation demonstrates a loss, as explained in policy statement PS22/13 and set out in DISP App 4, Options should:

- always calculate and offer Miss B redress as a cash lump sum payment,
- explain to Miss B before starting the redress calculation that:
 - her redress will be calculated on the basis that it will be invested prudently (in line with the cautious investment return assumption used in the calculation), and
 - a straightforward way to invest her redress prudently is to use it to augment her defined contribution pension
- offer to calculate how much of any redress Miss B receives could be augmented rather than receiving it all as a cash lump sum,
- if Miss B accepts Options' offer to calculate how much of her redress could be augmented, request the necessary information and not charge Miss B for the calculation, even if she ultimately decides not to have any of her redress augmented, and
- take a prudent approach when calculating how much redress could be augmented, given the inherent uncertainty around Miss B's end of year tax position.

Redress paid to Miss B as a cash lump sum will be treated as income for tax purposes. So, in line with DISP App 4, Options may make a notional deduction to cash lump sum payments to take account of tax that Miss B would otherwise pay on income from her pension. Based on the evidence provided, at the time of the transfer Miss B was in her late forties and her pension provision was worth about £153,000. So it's reasonable to assume that Miss B is likely to be a basic rate taxpayer at her selected retirement age, so the reduction would equal 20%. However, if Miss B would have been able to take a tax-free lump sum, the reduction should be applied to 75% of the compensation, resulting in an overall reduction of 15%.

3. Pay Miss B £750 for the distress she's suffered.

In addition to the financial loss that Miss B has suffered as a result of the problems with her pension, I think it's fair and reasonable to say that the loss of a significant portion, if not all, of her pension provision has caused Miss B distress. Particularly given Miss B's testimony about her health problems and her plan to access her pensions benefits at age 55 for adaptations to her home, which she says her SIPP problems have stopped her doing. So I think it's fair for Options to compensate Miss B for the distress it's caused her, and I think £750 is fair and reasonable compensation for that in the particular circumstances of this complaint.

My final decision

For the reasons given, it's my decision that Miss B's complaint should be upheld and that Options UK Personal Pensions LLP must pay fair redress as set out above.

Where I uphold a complaint, I can award fair compensation of up to £160,000, plus any interest and/or costs that I consider are appropriate. Where I consider that fair compensation requires payment of an amount that might exceed £160,000, I may recommend that the business pays the balance.

determination and award: I uphold the complaint. I consider that fair compensation should be calculated as set out above. My decision is that Options UK Personal Pensions LLP should pay the amount produced by that calculation up to the maximum of £160,000 (including distress and/or inconvenience but excluding costs) plus any interest set out above.

recommendation: If the amount produced by the calculation of fair compensation exceeds £160,000, I recommend Options UK Personal Pensions LLP pay Miss B the balance plus any interest on the balance as set out above.

The recommendation isn't part of my determination or award. Options UK Personal Pensions LLP doesn't have to do what I recommend. It's unlikely that Miss B could accept a decision and go to court to ask for the balance and Miss B may want to get independent legal advice before deciding whether to accept a decision.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Miss B to accept or reject my decision before 1 July 2024.

Ailsa Wiltshire
Ombudsman