

The complaint

Mr T complains that Gallium Fund Solutions Limited (“Gallium”) were responsible for the mis-sale of two bonds. Mr T says he was misled into thinking the investments were safe and he believed they had protection under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS).

What happened

The B&G Plc Bond

Mr T invested £20,000 into a B&G Plc three-year Compounding High-Yield IFISA Bond (BG22570) in April 2017 and £20,000 into a five-year Compounding High-Yield Bond (BG22845) in May 2017. Sales of the bonds were dealt with by BG Ltd, a separate business from Basset & Gold Plc (B&G Plc), the issuer of the bond. BG Ltd arranged applications for investment in the bonds, through a website it operated. And it was responsible for advertising/marketing the bond. Potential investors were also able to call BG Ltd, to discuss the bond.

B&G Plc and BG Ltd were both appointed representatives of Gallium. B&G Plc and BG Ltd were appointed representatives of Gallium from 17 February 2017 to 28 February 2018.

Mr T’s investment in the bonds

Mr T said he was referred to BG Ltd by a family member. Mr T called BG Ltd and spoke to a relationship manager who explained the products available and how to apply. Mr T then completed an online application in April 2017. Following ongoing discussions with his relationship manager, Mr T decided to invest further in May 2017. In a call from the day before, I’ve heard it was agreed that the application would be made online. I’ve also seen confirmation that both online applications were received. Mr T made other investments, which are not considered within this decision.

At the time of these investments, Mr T was retired and in receipt of his pension. He was attracted to investing with BG Ltd because of the high interest rates available. His previous investment experience was limited to bank and building society accounts. Mr T also had a small shareholding in a privatised utility company and he also held an NS&I pensioner bond. Mr T recalled being reassured during calls with BG Ltd that the investments were safe and were covered by FSCS. Requests were made for copies of any call recordings BG Ltd held. The majority of calls provided took place after the investments were made and no recorded conversations during the bond application process were provided. This decision therefore focuses on the online application process completed by Mr T.

On 8 January 2019, B&G Finance Limited (which by that point had taken on the role of BG Ltd), sent an email to all investors then holding B&G Plc bonds. This referred to the fact that nearly all the money invested in B&G Plc bonds had been lent to one short term and pay day lender, called Uncle Buck. Following action by the FCA, Uncle Buck went into administration in March 2020 - and B&G Plc went into administration shortly afterwards. As a result, Mr T has not had his invested capital returned to him.

The application process

On balance, having reviewed the information provided, I think it is more likely than not that Mr T completed online applications in April and May 2017. I have seen screen prints of each stage of the online application process. These show the application journey that Mr T underwent. This consisted of two stages, designed to meet the rules restricting who the bond could be promoted to and on how to test whether the investment was appropriate for the potential investor. The first was certification, where Mr T was categorised as an “everyday investor”. The second was the appropriateness test.

Gallium’s response to Mr T’s complaint

Gallium did not uphold Mr T’s complaint. It said Mr T had been given sufficient information and risk warnings about the investments. It then made further submissions, once Mr T’s complaint was referred to us. I have considered the submissions in full. I have also considered what Gallium described as its “position statement”, which sets out general information on the background to complaints about B&G Plc bonds.

Our investigator’s view

One of our investigators considered Mr T’s complaint and concluded it should be upheld. They said, in summary:

- The application process – both in terms of the certification of Mr T as a “restricted investor” and the assessment of the appropriateness of the bond for him - was misleading and didn’t gather sufficient information to comply with the FCA’s rules.
- Overall, BG Ltd, on Gallium’s behalf, didn’t comply with its regulatory obligations. Had it done so, Mr T wouldn’t have decided to invest or BG Ltd should have concluded that it shouldn’t allow Mr T to invest.

For these reasons, both cumulatively and individually, it was fair to uphold the complaint and for Gallium to compensate Mr T for the loss he has suffered.

Gallium’s response to the view

Gallium did not accept the investigator’s view. It said, in summary:

- Regardless of label, Mr T was required to confirm that he met the requirements of a restricted investor and confirmed that he did. It is not fair or reasonable to conclude that the use of the word “everyday” contributed to Mr T giving an incorrect declaration, and it was reasonable for it to rely on the declaration.
- The appropriateness test answers, and these confirmations were sufficient for Gallium to satisfy itself that prospective investors had sufficient knowledge and experience of the bonds to understand the risks those bonds involved, as per the relevant rules.
- It was reasonable for Gallium to rely on the outcome of this test.
- Mr T made the investment on the understanding it had risk associated with it, and did not choose to surrender it when receiving the email in 2019 which warned of the concentration risk. So he would have proceeded with the investment regardless.

What I've decided – and why

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

I am satisfied it is appropriate for me to consider all of the acts carried out by BG Ltd, on behalf of Gallium, in relation to the sale of the bond.

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.

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). I think Principles 6 (Customers' interests) and 7 (Communications with clients) are relevant here.

Principle 7 overlaps with COBS 4.2.1R (1) (*A firm must ensure that a communication or a financial promotion is fair, clear and not misleading*), which I also consider to be relevant here.

As mentioned, the bonds were non-readily realisable and therefore there were rules restricting who they could be promoted to and how to test whether the investments were appropriate for the potential investor. These rules were set out in COBS 4.7 and COBS 10.1, 10.2 and 10.3. I have considered the relevant rules in full.

I note Gallium has referred to the FCA's policy statement PS14/4, and to question and answer sessions with the FCA's Head of Investment Policy and UKCFA. I have considered these too.

Having considered all the available evidence and arguments I have reached the same conclusion as the investigator, for the same reasons. In summary:

- BG Ltd, acting on Gallium’s behalf, misled Mr T into certifying himself as belonging in a category to which he did not belong (a “restricted investor”) by changing the term used in the rules to “*everyday investor*” and describing the category as being one “*anyone*” could fall into. This was not treating Mr T fairly or acting in his best interests. Had BG Ltd followed the rules and not misled Mr T, it is unlikely he would have certified himself as being a restricted investor.
- The appropriateness test carried out by BG Ltd, on behalf of Gallium, did not meet the requirements of the rules. To be clear, even if the May 2017 application was not made online (which I find it likely was), there’s nothing to show that an appropriateness test was carried out that met the requirements of the rules.
- Had an appropriateness test been carried out that met the requirements of the rules, it would have been apparent the bonds were not appropriate investments for Mr T. In the circumstances Mr T would either not have proceeded or, acting fairly and reasonably, BG Ltd should have concluded it should not promote the bonds to Mr T.

For these reasons – individually and cumulatively – my decision is that Mr T’s complaint should be upheld. I am also satisfied Mr T would either not have proceeded to make the investment or would not have been able to proceed, had Gallium acted fairly and reasonably to meet its regulatory obligations. And so I am satisfied it is fair to ask Gallium to compensate Mr T for his losses.

Putting things right

In assessing what would be fair compensation, I consider that my aim should be to put Mr T as close to the position he would probably now be in if he had not invested in the bonds.

I take the view that Mr T would have invested differently. It is not possible to say *precisely* what he would have done differently. But I am satisfied that what I have set out below is fair and reasonable given Mr T's circumstances and objectives when he invested.

What must Gallium do?

To compensate Mr T fairly, Gallium must:

- Compare the performance of Mr T's investment with that of the benchmark shown below and pay the difference between the *fair value* and the *actual value* of the investments. If the *actual value* is greater than the *fair value*, no compensation is payable.
- Gallium should also add any interest set out below to the compensation payable.
- Gallium Fund Solutions Limited should provide details of its calculation to Mr T in a clear, simple format.

Income tax may be payable on any interest awarded.

<i>Portfolio name</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Benchmark</i>	<i>From ("start date")</i>	<i>To ("end date")</i>	<i>Additional interest</i>
Three-year Compounding High-Yield IFISA Bond (BG22570)	Still exists but illiquid	Average rate from fixed rate bonds	Date of investment	Date of my final decision	8% simple per year from final decision to settlement (if not settled within 28 days of the business receiving the complainant's acceptance)
Five-year Compounding High-Yield Bond (BG22845)	Still exists but illiquid	Average rate from fixed rate bonds	Date of investment	Date of my final decision	8% simple per year from final decision to settlement (if not settled within 28 days of the business receiving the complainant's acceptance)

Actual value

This means the actual amount payable from the investment at the end date.

If at the end date any asset is illiquid (meaning it could not be readily sold on the open market), it may be difficult to work out what the *actual value* is. In such a case the *actual value* should be assumed to be zero. This is provided Mr T agrees to Gallium taking ownership of the illiquid assets, if it wishes to. If it is not possible for Gallium to take ownership, then it may request an undertaking from Mr T that he repays to Gallium any amount he may receive from the bonds in future.

Fair value

This is what the investment would have been worth at the end date had it produced a return using the benchmark.

To arrive at the *fair value* when using the fixed rate bonds as the benchmark, Gallium should use the monthly average rate for one-year fixed-rate bonds as published by the Bank of England. The rate for each month is that shown as at the end of the previous month. Those rates should be applied to the investment on an annually compounded basis.

Why is this remedy suitable?

I have decided on this method of compensation because:

- Mr T wanted to achieve a reasonable return without any significant risk to his capital.

- The average rate for the fixed rate bonds would be a fair measure given Mr T's circumstances and objectives. It does not mean that Mr T would have invested only in a fixed rate bond. It is the sort of investment return a consumer could have obtained with little risk to their capital.

My final decision

For the reasons given I am upholding the complaint. I direct Gallium Fund Solutions Limited to put things right as set out above.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr T to accept or reject my decision before 29 March 2023.

Sarah Tozzi
Ombudsman