

The complaint

Mrs J invested in a bond issued by Basset & Gold Plc ("B&G Plc"). She complains that it was mis-sold to her by Basset Gold Limited ("BG Ltd"), an appointed representative of Gallium Fund Solutions Limited ("Gallium"). She says it was unsuitable for her and she was persuaded to invest by misleading information – in particular that it had Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) protection. She also feels the bond was mismanaged, as the money invested into it was all lent to one "payday" lender, rather than being diversified as she was led to believe it would be.

What happened

The B&G Plc Bond

Mrs J invested in a B&G Plc *"Three year Compounding High-Yield IFISA Bond"*. Sales of this bond were dealt with by BG Ltd, a separate business from B&G Plc, the issuer of the bond. BG Ltd arranged applications for investments in the bond, 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.

Mrs J's investment in the bond

Mrs J visited BG Ltd's website in April 2017 following an internet search for high interest producing products. She says she had no previous investment experience and was risk averse, and at the time had around £15,000 to £20,000 in savings. She says was re-assured that the bond she found details of and invested into was safe and well-diversified over lots of companies.

Mrs J says she completed the online application form and applied to invest £8,000. The bond she invested in offered an interest rate 6.70% per year, with the invested capital to be returned after three years.

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, Mrs J has not had her invested capital returned to her.

The application process

As noted, Mrs J says carried out her bond application online.

I have seen screen prints of each stage of the online application process. These show the application journey that Mrs J 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 Mrs J was categorised as “*everyday investor*”. The second was the appropriateness test.

Gallium’s response to Mrs J’s complaint

Gallium didn’t uphold Mrs J’s complaint. It said she had been given sufficient information and risk warnings about the investment. It then made further submissions once Mrs J’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 Mrs J’s complaint and concluded it should be upheld. They said, in summary:

- The application process – both in terms of the certification of Mrs J as a “restricted investor” and the assessment of the appropriateness of the bond for her - 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, Mrs J wouldn’t have decided to invest or BG Ltd should have concluded that it shouldn’t allow Mrs J to invest. For these reasons, both cumulatively and individually, it was fair to uphold the complaint and for Gallium to compensate Mrs J for the loss she suffered.

Gallium’s response to the view

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

- Our findings went beyond the scope of Mrs J’s complaint.
- Regardless of label, Mrs J was required to confirm that she met the requirements of a restricted investor and confirmed that she did. It is not fair or reasonable to conclude that the use of the word “everyday” contributed to Mrs J 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.
- Mrs J made the investment on the understanding it had risk associated with it, and did not chose to surrender it when receiving the email in 2019 which warned of the concentration risk. So she 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.

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.

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.

The bond was non-readily realisable and therefore there were rules restricting who it could be promoted to and how to test whether the investment was 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 Mrs J into certifying herself as belonging in a category to which she 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 Mrs J fairly or acting in her best interests. Had BG Ltd followed the rules and not misled Mrs J, it is unlikely she would have certified herself 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. And, had it done so, it would have been apparent the bond was not an appropriate investment for Mrs J. In the circumstances Mrs J would either not have proceeded or, acting fairly and reasonably, BG Ltd should have concluded it should not promote the bond to Mrs J.

For these reasons – individually and cumulatively – my decision is that Mrs J's complaint should be upheld. I am also satisfied Mrs J 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 Mrs J for her loss.

Putting things right

Fair compensation

In assessing what would be fair compensation, I consider that my aim should be to put Mrs J as close to the position she would probably now be in if she had not made the investment.

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

What must Gallium do?

To compensate Mrs J fairly, Gallium must:

- Compare the performance of Mrs J'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.
- It's clear Mrs J has been caused distress and inconvenience by the loss of her investment. Given her circumstances, this was money she couldn't afford to lose. I don't think Mrs J foresaw such a drastic loss and I recognise the considerable worry she will have felt when B&G Plc failed. I consider a payment of £350 is fair compensation for this.

Income tax may be payable on any interest awarded.

| Investment name | Status | Benchmark | From ("start date") | To ("end date") | Additional interest |
|--|---------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Three year Compounding High-Yield IFISA Bond | 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.

As the investment is illiquid (meaning it could not be readily sold on the open market), the *actual value* should be assumed to be zero. This is provided Mrs J agrees to Gallium taking ownership of the investment, if it wishes to. If it is not possible for Gallium to take ownership, then it may request an undertaking from Mrs J that she repays to Gallium any amount she may receive from the investment 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:

- Mrs J wanted to achieve a reasonable return and I don't think she wanted to take a significant risk.
- The average rate for the fixed rate bonds would be a fair measure given Mrs J's circumstances and objectives. It does not mean that Mrs J 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, my final decision is that I uphold the complaint and direct Gallium Fund Solutions Ltd to pay the amount calculated as set out above.

Gallium Fund Solutions Ltd should provide details of its calculation to Mrs J in a clear, simple format.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mrs J to accept or reject my decision before 7 April 2023.

James Harris
Ombudsman