

The complaint

Ms G complained about the poor service she has received from the business administering her personal pension.

Ms G says the information she has been able to access on-line about her pension is very poor and there are parts of her pension she is unable to view at all. Also, in trying to correct the on-line pension records and access the information she needs Ms G says she's had to endure very long wait times over the telephone. And although the provider has told her several times over many months that it was going to fix these issues, nothing has been done to address the access and accuracy problems she's encountered.

As Ms G is now almost 67 years old, this means she hasn't been able to make an informed decision about retiring.

ReAssure Limited is responsible for answering this complaint. So, to keep things simple, I'll refer mainly to 'ReAssure'.

What happened

Ms G's stakeholder pension was originally with a large and well-known pension provider. However, in 2020, ReAssure took over her pension as part of a large buy-out process.

Her pension isn't large but it is nevertheless important to her. Having experienced these problems initially, she first complained to ReAssure about the matters I've mentioned above. Ms G then referred the complaint to our Service and in November 2022 one of our investigator's issued a 'View' saying the complaint ought to be upheld. He recommended that ReAssure should pay Ms G some money for the distress and inconvenienced caused by its failures. He also asked the business to engage with Ms G and to provide her with the information she needed to make an informed decision about her pension.

ReAssure didn't respond to the investigator's View, although I've since confirmed some money was unilaterally paid to her for the distress and inconvenience caused by the ongoing failures.

As she remains unhappy about the on-line access and other issues still not being resolved, Ms G has asked for an ombudsman's final decision about her complaint.

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'm sorry to hear about the problems Ms G has encountered. She didn't ask for – or consent to – her pension being transferred to ReAssure and she's said that she's had nothing but trouble since the new business took over. Specific issues include:

- Her employer's pension contributions being held in a separate account which ReAssure refers to as a 'suspense account'. So, whilst Ms G can see her employer is making contributions from her pay slip, she can't confirm they are arriving safely in her pension account because she can't get any on-line access to the 'suspense account'.
- Ms G also wanted to change some important information relating to the beneficiaries of her pension should anything happened to her, but she hasn't been able to do this either. Ms G told us she has told ReAssure who she wants on the pension as beneficiaries, but this still hasn't been confirmed.
- She also wanted to adjust some of the funds the pension was invested into and wasn't able to do this in a reasonable timeframe.

I haven't listed all the problems Ms G seems to have encountered with her pension whilst with ReAssure, but I've considered what Ms G has said and I fully understand the frustration she would have felt. I can also see she's been told several times, for over a year now, that the on-line access issues would be resolved. These are strategic and company-wide issues which I understand are being addressed via an ICT Change Programme. However, despite being led to believe the improvements would help Ms G, she's still not able to access her employer's contributions on-line and has had to spend many hours trying to sort these types of things out.

However, as our investigator pointed out, the role of this Service is to deal with individual complaints between consumers and financial businesses. We do not supervise or monitor businesses in this context, that's a matter for the industry regulator the Financial Conduct Authority.

Nevertheless, it seems to me Ms G has lost confidence in the ability of ReAssure to deliver on its many promises to her regarding its on-line pensions portal and so she may wish to transfer to a different provider. I can see Ms G has reached an age where she is considering retiring and I don't think it is either fair or reasonable that she is having to go to great lengths just to find out very basic information about her pension. As it stands, I can agree how she's still unable to make an informed decision.

Since our investigator issued his view in November 2022, ReAssure seems no further forward with its ICT Programme, or certainly with its ability to deliver what Ms G needs. I also think it's poor and inconsistent communications with Ms G, and indeed our own Service has prolonged this matter. However, having spoken to the business, I accept Ms G has since received the good will payment as promised by ReAssure several months ago. And as these access issues still persist, ReAssure has now also agreed to pay Ms G a further £250 for the distress and inconvenience caused by its failures.

As I've said, even though I completely accept that Ms G's journey with ReAssure has been a frustrating one, it's not our purpose to oversee issues of customer service. This might provoke her into considering whether her ongoing relationship with the business ought to continue.

However, in this specific case, I can understand Ms G is considering retirement imminently. ReAssure's consistent failures are hampering this in my view and so I think it needs to put several matters right before Ms G ultimately considers what to do. I set these out below.

Putting things right

- ReAssure should pay Ms G a further £250 for the distress and inconvenience caused by its failures.
- I also direct that it should give her a full breakdown of her current pension account balance (employee and employer contributions) together with breakdown of all transactions over the last 12 months. This should be done manually and sent to her in a format that is understandable and clear.
- If Ms G wants to transfer her pension to another provider, ReAssure must promptly facilitate this at no charge to Ms G.

My final decision

I uphold Ms G's complaint.

I direct that ReAssure Limited carry out the above within 30 days of Ms G accepting my decision.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Ms G to accept or reject my decision before 13 April 2023.

Michael Campbell
Ombudsman