

The complaint

Mr B complains to Gallium Fund Solutions Limited about a bond he invested into in 2017. He says the bond was unsuitable for him based on the level of risk associated with it. Mr B says he was led to believe his investment would be asset-backed and felt it was “safe”.

What happened

The B&G Plc Bond

Mr B invested £15,000 in a B&G Plc 3-Year Fixed Monthly Income Bond in August 2017. Sales of this bond were dealt with by Basset Gold Limited (“BG Ltd”), a separate business from Basset & Gold Plc (“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 Fund Solutions Limited (“Gallium”). B&G Plc and BG Ltd were appointed representatives of Gallium from 17 February 2017 to 28 February 2018.

Mr B’s investment in the bond

Mr B explained he came across the bond when searching for different investments online. Mr B completed his online application on 30 August 2017.

Mr B says he had limited investment experience and understood his investment was protected.

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 B has not had his invested capital returned to him.

The application process

Mr B explained he completed his online application on 30 August 2017.

I have seen screen prints of each stage of the online application process. These show the application journey that Mr B 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 B was categorised as an ‘everyday investor’ according to the spreadsheet Gallium has provided. The second was the appropriateness test.

We asked Mr B about his investment experience and assets. He told us that his investment experience was based on reports he’d found in financial guides and the press. He had sold a flat and invested in what he believed were “safe” investments including this bond.

Gallium's response to Mr B's complaint

Gallium did not uphold Mr B's complaint. It said Mr B had been given sufficient information and risk warnings about the investment. It then made further submissions, once Mr B'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 B's complaint and concluded it should be upheld. They said, in summary:

- The application process – in terms of the assessment of the appropriateness of the bond for him was inconsistent with the FCA's rules or guidance, 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 B wouldn't have decided to invest or BG Ltd should have concluded that it shouldn't allow Mr B to invest. For these reasons, both cumulatively and individually, it was fair to uphold the complaint and for Gallium to compensate Mr B for the loss he has suffered.

Gallium's response to the view

Gallium didn't accept the investigator's view. It said, in summary:

- Our findings went beyond the scope of Mr B's complaint
- 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 B 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, 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.

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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.

As mentioned, 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:

- I'm satisfied Mr B's self-certification was in line with the information we've had about his savings – principally that the £15,000 he put in the bond was less than 10% of his wealth. He was classed as an "everyday investor" but may have identified as being a High Net Worth Investor.
- The wording used by BG Ltd for the High Net Worth Investor category mirrors the wording set out at 4.12.6R and, based on the available evidence, it seems Mr B may have had sufficient assets to meet the definition of a High Net Worth investor.
- The appropriateness test carried out by BG Ltd, on behalf of Gallium, did not however meet the requirements of the rules. And, had it done so, it would have been apparent the bond was not an appropriate investment for Mr B, as he did not have the necessary experience and knowledge to understand the risks involved in investing in the bond – especially given he thought it was a "safe" investment. In the circumstances Mr B would either not have proceeded or, acting fairly and reasonably, BG Ltd should have concluded it should not promote the bond to him.

For this reason my decision is that Mr B's complaint should be upheld. I am also satisfied Mr B 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 B for his loss.

Putting things right

Fair compensation

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

I take the view that Mr B 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 B's circumstances and objectives when he invested.

What must Gallium do?

To compensate Mr B fairly, Gallium must:

- Compare the performance of Mr B'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.

Income tax may be payable on any interest awarded.

Portfolio name	Status	Benchmark	From ("start date")	To ("end date")	Additional interest
3-Year Fixed Monthly Income Bond	Still exists but illiquid	For half the investment: FTSE UK Private Investors Income Total Return Index; for the other half: 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 B 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 B that he repays to Gallium any amount he may receive from the portfolio 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.

Any withdrawal, income or other distributions paid out of the investments should be deducted from the fair value calculation at the point it was actually paid so it ceases to accrue any return in the calculation from that point on. If there is a large number of regular payments, to keep calculations simpler, I'll accept if Gallium totals all those payments and deducts that figure at the end to determine the fair value instead of deducting periodically. If any distributions or income were automatically paid out into a portfolio and left uninvested, they must be deducted at the end to determine the fair value, and not periodically.

Why is this remedy suitable?

I have decided on this method of compensation because:

- Mr B wanted Income with some growth with a small risk to his capital.
- The average rate for the fixed rate bonds would be a fair measure for someone who wanted to achieve a reasonable return without risk to his capital.
- The FTSE UK Private Investors Income **Total Return** index (prior to 1 March 2017, the FTSE WMA Stock Market Income total return index) is a mix of diversified indices representing different asset classes, mainly UK equities and government bonds. It would be a fair measure for someone who was prepared to take some risk to get a higher return.
- I consider that Mr B's risk profile was in between, in the sense that he was prepared to take a small level of risk to attain his investment objectives. So, the 50/50 combination would reasonably put Mr B into that position. It does not mean that Mr B would have invested 50% of his money in a fixed rate bond and 50% in some kind of index tracker fund. Rather, I consider this a reasonable compromise that broadly reflects the sort of return Mr B could have obtained from investments suited to his objective and risk attitude.

My final decision

I uphold the complaint. My decision is that Gallium Fund Solutions Limited should pay the amount calculated as set out above.

Gallium Fund Solutions Limited should provide details of its calculation to Mr B in a clear, simple format.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr B to accept or reject my decision before 29 March 2023.

Charlotte Wilson
Ombudsman