

The complaint

Mr and Ms W complain about what happened when they tried to make an overpayment onto their mortgage with Barclays Bank UK PLC. Ms W said Barclays repeatedly told her to go into a branch, even after she'd explained this wasn't suitable for her.

What happened

Whilst this complaint is brought by both Mr and Ms W, as the mortgage is in both their names, our dealings have been with Ms W, who was trying to make the overpayment in question here from a sole account in her name. So I'll mainly refer to her in this decision.

Ms W told us she uses online banking for her transactions. At the start of September, she wanted to make a mortgage overpayment, and had been told she could do this through a transfer using online banking. But she wasn't able to make the payment, instead she just got repeated error messages.

Ms W said she spoke to the mortgage department a number of times, and they couldn't help. They suggested she make the transfer by phone, but two different teams within Barclays weren't able to take payment for her. The mortgage department suggested she should go into a branch.

Ms W has been told that the error code she can see is because Barclays' system isn't picking up that she has a mortgage account. But she can see her mortgage account when she logs in to online banking. Ms W told us the mortgage team said a member of their technical department would call, and try to help with this problem. They said she'd get a call within 24 to 48 hours. But they never called.

Ms W said she didn't want to go into a branch, because she doesn't drive, and as her local branch has closed, this means a difficult trip on public transport. She also told us about a health condition that makes attending a branch difficult for her.

Ms W said she had managed to make the overpayment online, as a payment rather than a transfer. She said it was very stressful for her, as this generated a message saying Barclays did not recognise the account she was paying into, and she was making the payment at her own risk. Ms W felt she'd been warned that Barclays would not be responsible if the payment did not go through. And it was a large amount of money, so Ms W said she was very worried about this. She made a small payment of £1 first, followed by incrementally larger payments. These did reach her mortgage account, but she said this process still caused her a great deal of anxiety.

Ms W said she'd never had a reply to her complaint. But when this case came to us, Barclays said it had written to her. In that letter, it offered her £100 and a hamper, to say sorry for the difficulties she'd had with the overpayment. Barclays said it hadn't been able to identify any errors, and it asked her to send screenshots of the problem, so it could investigate further.

Ms W said that wasn't helpful. She said her health issues meant she couldn't accept the

offer of a hamper. But more importantly, Ms W said the problem hadn't actually been fixed. She still gets the same error message when trying to make mortgage overpayments online. She also said that, since the problems she experienced trying to pay over the phone, no one had suggested she would be able to make payments in that way in future either. So it looked as if she would just run in to the same problems next year.

Ms W said she'd still never had the promised call back from Barclays' technical team. And she didn't think Barclays should be insisting that she, or other people with mobility issues, should be told to go into a branch to get help with problems.

Our investigator thought this complaint should be upheld. He said Ms W wanted to make an overpayment promptly, so she could do so without incurring an early repayment charge. She hadn't been able to, and she had spent a lot of frustrating time on the phone trying to resolve the issue. She'd been told what the error code meant, but hadn't received the promised call back from the IT or technical team to help.

Our investigator said that Barclays had asked our service for a screenshot of the error to investigate further. He'd sent that, but Barclays hadn't responded.

Our investigator noted that Barclays had told Ms W she could pay directly from a different bank, and provided details to do that. Or she could go into branch, but Ms W had already explained why she would prefer to avoid that. Our investigator said he couldn't see Barclays had offered to take payment by cheque, or told Ms W how to do this.

Our investigator said that Ms W may want to make overpayments each year, and she was concerned this problem would just keep happening. So our investigator said that Barclays should pay Ms W £150 in compensation, instead of the £100 it had offered. And he wanted Barclays' technical or IT team to contact Ms W to resolve the issue and ensure it doesn't happen again. He said that Barclays should call Ms W before 13 May 2023.

Ms W didn't want to accept this resolution to her complaint right away. She was concerned Barclays wouldn't call. She said she just wasn't able to go into a branch, as her health condition had since deteriorated. So she could only pay from another account, which Barclays says she does at her own risk. That was stressful when large amounts were involved. Ms W also repeated that she wasn't able to use the hamper, so asked if she could have a payment instead.

Barclays said it would pay the £150 in compensation that our investigator suggested. And it would replace the offered hamper with an additional £75 in compensation. But Ms W said the deadline for Barclays to call her had passed, and no one had contacted her. So she didn't want to settle this complaint. She felt what had happened was discriminatory. She said she hadn't been offered an appointment in branch, she'd just been told to go in and speak to someone. Ms W said that at the time, she was unable to stand in a queue.

Barclays said its technical team hadn't been able to identify any known issue and the access on the account seemed to be correct. It said that unfortunately, with technical issues, it often needs customers to try again, so that it can see if the issue persists. Barclays asked whether Ms W was still having problems, and if she could send further screenshots of any error.

Our investigator pressed Barclays to call Ms W, as it had already offered and he then requested, but it returned to suggesting that she go into a branch. Barclays did, however, finally respond to our investigator's question about how Ms W could pay by cheque. So she does now have that option too.

Ms W said the information on how to pay by cheque was useful, but it had come nine

months too late, and was only provided after pressure by our service. Ms W said she was concerned that Barclays was discriminating against the less physically able, and she wanted it to change this practice. She said it just wasn't good enough that Barclays was refusing to engage on the technical issue.

Ms W wanted this complaint to be considered by an ombudsman, so it was passed to me for a final decision. I then reached my provisional decision on this case.

My provisional decision

I issued a provisional decision on this complaint and explained why I did propose to uphold it. This is what I said then:

I have listened to a number of calls that Ms W had with Barclays, where she has patiently sought to resolve this issue, without success. So I can understand that Ms W would be deeply frustrated by Barclays' failure to resolve this issue for her, and by its repeated suggestions that she go into a branch, which Ms W was clear when she made her complaint was not a suitable resolution for her.

I think that, although Ms W still isn't able to transfer money directly across from her account to her mortgage (in the way I've heard Barclays repeatedly tell her should be possible) she does now, finally, have some options for making overpayments on her mortgage. She is able to make a direct payment, and although this is a little more stressful than an internal transfer, she does have the comfort that this has worked before. And she also now, finally, has the details to pay by cheque. So I think she is able to make overpayments on to her mortgage in future.

I know that Ms W's account isn't working the way it should. But Barclays won't agree to contact Ms W to try to resolve this, even though I have heard it offer to do so directly to her on a recorded phone call, and our investigator then strongly suggested it should do, in order to resolve this complaint.

I don't think it would assist here for me to seek to compel Barclays to contact Ms W about this problem. That's not solely because of its reluctance to do so, but also because I'm not able to say whether or not Barclays can actually fix whatever is wrong here. There must be some doubt about that, as Barclays has told us it has investigated, and it can't see what's wrong. So I'll bear in mind that the current position is, and is likely to remain, that Ms W can't just operate her accounts in the way that other customers can, because of a technical problem at Barclays.

I think that leaves me needing to consider how Barclays has handled this complaint. And I do not think that Ms W has been provided with an acceptable level of service in this case.

Barclays repeatedly defaulted to telling Ms W that she could make the payment in branch. Having listened to a number of calls where Barclays suggested other options for making payments (through transfers, over the phone, via a different department) which did not work, I can understand why Ms W expressed doubts that attending a branch would finally resolve this issue. But more importantly, Ms W did explain that this would have been particularly difficult for her. I think it was particularly unhelpful in this case that Barclays then continued to suggest that Ms W should go into a branch (in the later stages, suggesting she also takes her computer with her) even after both Ms W and our service had explained why this would not be suitable for her.

Ms W feels that Barclays is discriminating against less physically able customers. I should explain here that our service doesn't have the power to make a finding on whether an act amounts to discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. That is something only the Courts can do. Our role is to decide what's fair and reasonable in all the circumstances. In order to decide that, however, we have to take a number of things into account including relevant law and what we consider to have been good industry practice at the time. So I can make a finding on whether Ms W was treated fairly. And when I'm doing that, I'll consider relevant rules and legislation alongside the circumstances of the case.

In this case, I do not think Ms W's problem with making payments on her mortgage has been well managed. It is worth noting that many of the people Ms W spoke to at Barclays initially did try hard to resolve this problem for her. But overall, I think Barclays let her down.

I don't think the payment of compensation that Barclays has agreed to make, to date, reflects the full impact of this complaint. In considering compensation in this case, I have to bear in mind how much time this has taken up for Ms W, and how frustrating this has been for her. I also need to consider that Ms W feels the bank's actions go beyond poor customer service and that she has been discriminated against. I can understand why Ms W feels this way, and I have to take account of the effect that Barclays' repeated suggestion that Ms W should attend a branch (even after she explained why she isn't able to do this) was not only unhelpful and inappropriate, it is also likely to have had a significant impact on someone who was dealing with the increasing restrictions of a deteriorating health condition. I don't think Barclays has grasped how its actions have made Ms W feel.

I also have to bear in mind that Barclays has told us that its technical team will not be contacting Ms W about the issues she's experiencing - despite agreeing to this previously. I think it's clear that Ms W has experienced a problem, and I accept what she's told us about continuing to do so. But Barclays has told us that the access on the account seems correct, and it can't see what's wrong. So it now appears that there is very little prospect of the underlying problem being resolved. The position appears likely to remain that Ms W doesn't have the same choices about how to make mortgage overpayments as Barclays' other customers.

For those reasons, I think that Barclays should pay rather more compensation than it has suggested in this case. I think a total payment of £750 would be appropriate here. That would include the payment that Barclays previously agreed to make, and the payment it suggested as a substitute for a hamper it offered previously. I think that would provide a fair and reasonable outcome to this complaint.

I invited the parties to make any final points, if they wanted, before issuing my final decision. Both sides replied.

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.

Ms W replied to accept my provisional decision. She said she thought this was a very fair assessment of the situation, and £750 would be reasonable compensation for her time and energy spent on this, and her frustration when trying to deal with Barclays. She also said she hoped Barclays would review its treatment of less able-bodied clients. She said she felt

completely unheard. And she also noted that Barclays could have saved all this trouble by telling her she could write a cheque for the overpayment.

Barclays wrote asking me to reconsider, and saying it would like to offer some further details.

Barclays said Ms W first tried to make this payment on 2 September. Barclays said it couldn't have been earlier, because Ms W hadn't moved the money from her other bank, into this account, until then.

Barclays said its agent called Ms W on 6 September, to help with the overpayment. They tried to use Barclays' "Single Overpayment" process, but that didn't work due to an IT issue, and the agent suggested Ms W contact the online banking helpdesk.

Barclays said its agent called Ms W on 7 September, and suggested she use the "Make A Payment" option. Ms W started to do this, but she only got part-way through. Then the Confirmation of Payee system said it couldn't confirm the account where her payment was going. So Ms W didn't complete the payment.

Barclays said it could see Ms W did make a payment on 22 September. It said since then she has been able to make any future payments. Barclays said it couldn't see any unsuccessful attempts. It said the payment was completed after a telephone conversation Barclays had with Ms W.

Barclays said it understood that Ms W was disappointed the "Single Overpayment" process didn't work, but the "Make a Payment" option was working, and doesn't take any extra effort to use. When Ms W first used this option, she was paying a new account and needed to enter the account number and payment reference. Barclays said its mortgage accounts are not included in the Confirmation of Payee system, so Ms W got a message saying Barclays was unable to verify the payee. But now she's made a payment, this account would be on her list of payees, so she doesn't need to fill in these details again, and can carry out her payments quickly.

Barclays said the only other contact attempt it could see since 22 September 2022 was on 14 November 2022 when Barclays tried to talk to Ms W about her complaint. But it couldn't reach her then, so it wrote to her.

Barclays said it was sending through partial transcripts for some of its calls with Ms W. It thought these showed that Ms W hadn't told it about her vulnerabilities until after it had suggested she go into a branch. Barclays didn't think Ms W had told it about this until she sent a complaint to its CEO. So Barclays didn't agree that its requests for Ms W to visit a branch didn't take account of Ms W's vulnerabilities. It said when it was talking to her on the phone, it didn't know about that.

Barclays had previously sent us a call where Ms W asked how to make an overpayment, on 30 August. On this call the agent mentions that call waiting times were very long at that time, because Barclays was incredibly busy around this time.

The call recordings after this, that Barclays has sent us, do not include any calls from 6 September. They do include four separate call recordings for 7 September, and another four call recordings for 22 September.

Barclays said it thought Ms W had spent around 1 hour 50 minutes in total during all her calls with it in September, including wait times and call transfers. Barclays has sent our service recordings during September which total over an hour, and those recordings also refer to other calls, both successful calls and calls where Ms W gave up after a long period

on hold before she got an answer. It doesn't seem likely that Ms W's total call time during this month, including time spent on hold, was under two hours.

I have listened again to these calls, and I appreciate that Ms W didn't flag at an early stage that she was not easily able to attend a branch. I think it's most likely that Ms W simply didn't want to raise her vulnerability with Barclays at this stage.

But Barclays acknowledges that Ms W had told it as part of her complaint that she had reduced mobility, so attending a branch wasn't suitable for her. And it also acknowledges that when this case came to us, Ms W still wasn't able to make a payment directly from her Barclays account to her mortgage, using Barclays' own internal transfer system. So it isn't clear why Barclays' complaint handler would tell our service, even after our investigator had issued a view, that the solution to this problem would be for Ms W to attend a branch.

Barclays also hasn't explained why, after it offered Ms W a call to assist her with the technical problems she was having, it then repeatedly refused to ring her about this issue, including after it had understood she wasn't easily able to attend a branch.

For those reasons, I still think that when it was proposing solutions to the problem Ms W has experienced, using Barclays' own internal payment transfer system, Barclays didn't take account of Ms W's reduced mobility. And I still think that Barclays should make the payment I previously proposed. For the reasons set out above, I haven't changed my mind. I'll now make the decision I originally proposed.

My final decision

My final decision is that Barclays Bank UK PLC must pay Mr and Ms W a total of £750 in compensation. Barclays Bank UK PLC can count towards that amount any compensation it has already paid to Mr and Ms W in this case.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Ms W and Mr W to accept or reject my decision before 16 October 2023

Esther Absalom-Gough
Ombudsman