

The complaint

Mrs G complains about Bank of Scotland PLC trading as Halifax (Halifax) in that she could not access her accounts from abroad, and the telephone service she received when attempting resolve the matter.

What happened

As Mrs G has spent most of her time over the last few years outside the UK, she decided in 2023 to register for internet banking with Halifax for convenience, which she successfully did. And she made some changes to her statement instructions via this method. When Mrs G wanted to do more, she needed to comply with further security regulations, one of which was to register a mobile number which needed to be already held by Halifax. Mrs G only had a UK landline and whilst it was registered with Halifax, a mobile number was required.

In order to add a mobile number to Halifax's system, Mrs G was required to attend a branch, or input it using their app however in order to have the app, she needed a mobile number registered with Halifax. This meant her only option was to complete the process in branch. Halifax did say that as an alternative to internet banking, she could use their telephone banking service.

Living abroad, Mrs G could not conveniently visit a branch so attempted to deal with the situation by telephone with Halifax but was unsuccessful with them saying that the lack of a mobile number on their system was the root cause of her not being able to gain the access she needed.

Mrs G then complained to Halifax explaining her predicament, the inconvenience, and how the problems using her account from abroad have been going on since around 2020. Halifax investigated and didn't uphold the complaint citing the fact that as they have no mobile number on file, internet banking cannot be fully completed. They also said that as Mrs G's accounts are UK bank accounts, they could not guarantee their messaging services would work from abroad. However, as a gesture for the inconvenience that Mrs G talked about in her letter, they offered £80.

Mrs G remained unhappy and brought the complaint to this service and an investigator looked into it. Whilst our investigator appreciated the inconvenience of the internet banking issue, they didn't uphold the matter saying Halifax's security requirements and protocols are fair. They did suggest that in view of the circumstances, Halifax should send Mrs G account statements in the usual way they would for UK residents.

Mrs G remained dissatisfied with our investigator's view so requested an ombudsman review 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 have looked very carefully at all the information Halifax have provided to see if it has acted within its terms and conditions, followed due process, and to see if it treated Mrs G fairly. I've also looked through what Mrs G supplied including her correspondence following our investigator's view.

I was sorry to learn that what should have been a straightforward internet banking registration turned into a stressful experience. Part of my role is to determine whether what took place was reasonable, whether Halifax followed the process correctly and whether Mrs G did all she could as a customer to work with them.

One point I want to address first is Mrs G's comments that her troubles have been going on since 2020, including several prolonged telephone calls in which she said Halifax were unhelpful. In terms of evidence, I've not seen anything to support this other than a previous complaint Mrs G raised about an international payment from a savings account. Regarding the telephone calls, Halifax have said that they can't listen to four years of calls, so in summary, I've not seen any evidence to back up Mrs G's comments although I do note that Halifax have offered compensation as mentioned above.

Our investigator recommended that Halifax send statements to Mrs G as they would a UK resident, which I agree with. I note that in Mrs G's response to that, she asked that ideally, they are sent to her address abroad which she provided when she made further contact advising the effects of the death of her stepfather. I'd like to add my sincere condolences to Mrs G. Despite our investigator passing on that address to the Halifax complaints team, I did want to confirm that they have said unfortunately, Mrs G would need to contact them directly to update it.

A fundamental aspect of this complaint relates to operating a UK bank account from outside the UK and more specifically, the expectation of using a UK internet banking system from abroad and without the requisite mobile telephone number registered.

I know Mrs G has said that she visited a Halifax branch in 2022 explaining her circumstances and was given an assurance that she could operate UK accounts from abroad. But with respect, I haven't seen any evidence around what was discussed. Therefore, I can't substantiate this.

Given UK-based bank accounts are intended for UK residents, I do believe that continued usage by customers abroad make problems more likely. Examples such as the previous issue that Mrs G had attempting to transfer money internationally from a savings account, and her inability to deposit currency cheques into the account which I noted in a letter from Mrs G to our investigator. The ultimate solution for a customer in Mrs G's circumstances is to move their banking to their home country so the services match the country.

This complaint has been with Halifax since June 2023, and I note within the file they sent to our service, they were very keen to try and resolve the matter by telephone. However, they only had Mrs G's UK landline number and she lives abroad, therefore negating their attempts to speak to her. In Halifax's complaint correspondence, Mrs G has been supplied with a named contact, a telephone number and an extension number. It might have been preferable for Mrs G to speak to Halifax's complaints team by phone to speed up the resolution, rather than pursue contact in writing.

I wanted to acknowledge some information that Mrs G sent about Halifax which she sourced from a social media company and an online review community but that's all I can do. My focus here is what happened to Mrs G solely, not what may have happened to other people so I can't take this into consideration.

Finally, one more aspect I wanted to address was Mrs G's concern that initially she was able via Halifax's internet banking to amend her statement instruction but then prevented from doing anything else and why this would be. As our investigator alluded to and I support, Halifax are entitled to design and operate systems which allow certain functions to be completed with one layer of security, and others with an additional layer.

In conclusion, I don't uphold this complaint. This stems from the lack of evidence showing errors made by Halifax, their reasonable access and security requirements and, their efforts towards Mrs G taking into account a customer attempting to use a UK internet banking portal from abroad. I find that Halifax treated Mrs G fairly and so I cannot require it to take any further action towards her.

My final decision

For the reasons I have given it is my final decision that the complaint is not upheld. Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mrs G to accept or reject my decision before 18 April 2024.

Chris Blamires
Ombudsman