

The complaint

Mr and Mrs K complain that Nationwide Building Society hasn't offered them a new interest rate product or extended the term of their mortgage.

What happened

Mr and Mrs K have an interest only mortgage that's due to end in December 2024. They had an interest rate product of 1.59% that was expiring in February 2024. In November 2023 they contacted Nationwide using its online webchat portal to ask about taking out a new interest rate product.

After some discussion, the Nationwide adviser told Mr and Mrs K that as their mortgage term was due to end in less than two years' time, and the shortest products it had available were for a minimum term of two years, Mr and Mrs K wouldn't be able to take a new interest rate product without one of its advisers first discussing their circumstances.

Mr and Mrs K said they couldn't communicate by phone or go into branch because they were disabled. They said they could email, write letters, or communicate on the online webchat portal. Nationwide said Mr and Mrs K could discuss things with an adviser using a text relay service, and explained that would be similar to using the online webchat portal.

Mr and Mrs K complained. They were unhappy that Nationwide was refusing to give them a new interest rate product. They said they were able to switch products online before without having to speak to an adviser and wanted to do the same again. They didn't feel Nationwide was taking account of their disabilities or trying to help them. They were worried about their monthly payments increasing when their product ended, and were also worried about what would happen at the end of the mortgage term – as they had no plan to repay the capital balance and were concerned they'd be made homeless.

Nationwide agreed that some of the conversation on the online webchat portal could have been handled better and offered to pay Mr and Mrs K £25 for the frustration caused. It said Mr and Mrs K were able to take out their existing interest rate product online in 2021 because they selected a three year product and had four years left to run on their mortgage term at the time. Now Nationwide's shortest products were for two years, and Mr and Mrs K had less than two years left on their mortgage term.

Nationwide said that there were some options available to Mr and Mrs K, but they would need to have a conversation with an adviser to discuss them to ensure it was providing the right support. It said it could discuss potential options and support with a third party on Mr and Mrs K's behalf over the phone, or Mr and Mrs K could use its text relay service. It said that would allow Mr and Mrs K to type a message which would be relayed to Nationwide's adviser. When the adviser responds, it would be in written form so it would appear as a webchat. Nationwide also offered to arrange a home visit where one of its advisers would attend Mr and Mrs K's home to discuss things with them. It said Mr and Mrs K could arrange for a third party to be with them if they thought that would help. It sent them an income and expenditure form to complete and explained that information would be needed for the discussion.

Mr and Mrs K brought their complaint to our service. One of our Investigators considered the complaint and explained that she thought Nationwide had offered Mr and Mrs K suitable alternatives to discuss and agree next steps.

Mr and Mrs K asked for an Ombudsman to review their 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.

Firstly, I appreciate Mr and Mrs K have found this experience stressful. I understand they're worried about the possibility of losing their home, and are frustrated that Nationwide hasn't agreed to switch their interest rate and extend their mortgage term. But I think it's important to note that Nationwide has not refused to help Mr and Mrs K. It has explained that in order to make the changes Mr and Mrs K would like to make, it's going to need more information about their needs and circumstances so it can give suitable advice and ensure any changes agreed are right for them.

I understand Mr and Mrs K would like Nationwide to agree to their requests without any sort of assessment or discussion. But Mr and Mrs K weren't eligible to switch to any of Nationwide's interest rate products at the time they enquired because of the short time left on their mortgage term. So I don't think it was unfair of Nationwide to suggest that Mr and Mrs K speak to an adviser about their overall circumstances so it could consider the best way to help them.

Mr and Mrs K have said they're unable to communicate by phone. They've told our service that as a result of their disabilities they need more time to review documents, suggestions, and answer questions. They've said they cannot communicate over the phone or face to face and need more time than an ordinary person to understand information and make decisions. They say for that reason, they can only communicate in writing.

Lenders are required to make reasonable adjustments in the way they communicate with their customers in circumstances like Mr and Mrs K's. During Nationwide's interactions with Mr and Mrs K, it has offered to communicate with them using its text relay service (which it's said would be similar to Mr and Mrs K's experience of using the webchat) or have someone come to their home to visit them and discuss things. It's also suggested it could discuss things with a representative acting on Mr and Mrs K's behalf.

Mr and Mrs K have said they don't want to use any of those options. They only want to use the online webchat portal, email, or send letters. Nationwide has explained its advisers aren't able to use the online webchat portal, but the text relay service would give Mr and Mrs K the same experience. Our service has asked Mr and Mrs K why they don't feel they can use the text relay service, but they haven't given us any reasons why this wouldn't be suitable for their needs.

There is a clear communication breakdown here. Nationwide needs to make reasonable adjustments and ensure it's trying to support Mr and Mrs K in a way that's appropriate for them. But Mr and Mrs K also need to engage with the process and accept that in order for Nationwide to help them, there is going to need to be an assessment of their circumstances and an ongoing dialogue in some format.

Based on the information provided to me, I've not seen anything to suggest that Mr and Mrs K would be unable to use the text relay service Nationwide has offered. They were happy to use the online webchat portal, and Nationwide has explained the experience would

be similar. I appreciate Mr and Mrs K have said they need more time to process information and answer questions. I think the text relay service should allow them to do that. But Nationwide should be flexible with this. And if it means the conversation needs to take place over several different days so Mr and Mrs K can digest things in the meantime and formulate responses to questions, it should accommodate that.

Mr and Mrs K have also had the help of a friend when using our service, so this is something they may want to consider to help them with their conversations with Nationwide if they feel comfortable to do so.

Nationwide has sent Mr and Mrs K an income and expenditure form to complete and has explained it will need that information before it can agree how best to support them. I appreciate Mr and Mrs K have said they don't want to complete forms, but it's important that Nationwide understands Mr and Mrs K's current financial circumstances in order to ensure it's providing the right level of support. If Mr and Mrs K need help completing the form, they can approach the Citizen's Advice Bureau for assistance. They have an online chat service, and also use text relay.

I do appreciate Mr and Mrs K have found this experience stressful and are worried about what is going to happen at the end of the year when their mortgage ends, but I would encourage them to engage with Nationwide to allow it to help them and agree the next steps. Whilst I appreciate it will come as a disappointment to them, overall, I'm not satisfied Nationwide has treated Mr and Mrs K unfairly.

My final decision

Considering everything, for the reasons I've explained, I don't uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mrs K and Mr K to accept or reject my decision before 1 November 2024.

Kathryn Billings
Ombudsman