

The complaint and what happened

Mr U has complained about Creation Consumer Finance Ltd's ('Creation') response to a claim he made under Section 75 ('s.75') of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 (the 'CCA') and in relation to allegations of an unfair relationship taking in to account Section 140A ('s.140A') of the CCA.

I've included relevant sections of my provisional decision from September 2024, which form part of this final decision. In my provisional decision I set out the reasons why I wasn't planning to uphold this complaint. In brief that was because I wasn't persuaded that Mr U was induced into buying the solar panel system at the heart of this dispute by misrepresentations, so I didn't find the basis of an unfair relationship between him and Creation.

I asked both parties to let me have any more information they wanted me to consider. Creation accepted my findings and Mr U has not responded.

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.

Having done so, I'm not upholding it, and I'll reiterate why, but first I've included here the relevant sections of my provisional decision:

"What happened

In May 2015, Mr U bought a solar panel system ('the system') using a 10-year fixed sum loan from Creation. He bought it from a supplier I'll call "E". The total amount payable under the agreement was £17,061.60, and it was due to be paid back with 120 monthly repayments of £142.18.

Mr U complained to Creation, he said that he was told by a salesperson that the system was free, but then when he realised he did have to pay, he was told that, "...the government would pay for them." However, he says that hasn't happened, and he's suffered a financial loss. He also believed that what happened at the time of the sale created an unfair relationship between himself and Creation.

Creation responded to the complaint in its final response, it considered Mr U had brought him claim more than six years after the cause of action occurred under the Limitation Act ('LA').

Unhappy with Creation's response, Mr U referred him complaint to our service.

An investigator considered Mr U's complaint. After initially upholding it, he ultimately thought that there was a lack of evidence in this case to lead him to uphold the complaint. He particularly noted that Mr U appeared to have no documentation from the time of the sale and that he hadn't raised concerns with the installer earlier.

Mr U didn't accept that. Creation didn't respond, but had earlier underlined that the event complained of occurred in May 2015, and had therefore been brought too late for this service

to consider it. It also went on to comment on how things should be put right for Mr U if the complaint were upheld. So, the case was progressed to the next stage of our process, an Ombudsman's decision.

Since then, we asked Mr U for some more information about the sale, which he has provided in part. Having considered everything, such as there is, I'm currently not planning to uphold the complaint, which I will explain in detail.

What I've provisionally 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.

Having done so, I'm planning to find that this complaint is within my jurisdiction to consider, but that the merits of it should not be upheld.

My provisional findings on jurisdiction

The s.75 complaint

The event complained of here is Creation's alleged wrongful rejection of Mr U's s.75 claim on 1 December 2021, this relates to a regulated activity under our compulsory jurisdiction. Mr U brought his complaint about this to the ombudsman service on 7 December 2021. So, his complaint in relation to the s.75 claim was brought in time for the purposes of our jurisdiction.

The unfair relationship under s.140A complaint

I have also considered Creation's arguments in its response on our jurisdiction over the complaint about an unfair relationship under s.140A. I am satisfied this aspect of the complaint was brought in time so that the Financial Ombudsman has jurisdiction.

Mr U is able to make a complaint about an unfair relationship between himself and Creation per s.140A. The event complained of for the purposes of DISP 2.8.2R(2)(a) is Creation's participation, for so long as the credit relationship continued, in an allegedly unfair relationship with him. This accords with the court's approach to assessing unfair relationships – the assessment is performed as at the date when the credit relationship ended: *Smith v Royal Bank of Scotland plc* [2023] UKSC 34.

S.140A doesn't impose a liability to pay a sum of money in the same way as s.75. Rather, it sets out the basis for treating relationships between creditors and debtors as unfair. Under s.140A a court can find a debtor-creditor relationship is unfair, because of the terms of the credit agreement and any related agreement, how the creditor exercised or enforced their rights under these agreements, and anything done or not done by the supplier on the creditor's behalf before or after the making of a credit agreement or any related agreement. A court must make its determination under s.140A with regard to all matters it thinks relevant, including matters relating to the creditor and matters relating to the debtor.

The High Court's judgment in *Patel v Patel* [2009] EWHC 3264 QB established that determining whether the relationship complained of was unfair has to be made "having regard to the entirety of the relationship and all potentially relevant matters up to the time of making the determination". The time for making determination in the case of an existing relationship is the date of trial, if the credit relationship is still alive at trial, or otherwise the date when the credit relationship ended. This judgment has recently been approved by the Supreme Court in *Smith v Royal Bank of Scotland Plc* [2023] UKSC 34 ('Smith').

Throughout the period of the credit agreement, a creditor should conduct its relationship with the borrower fairly, including by taking corrective measures. In particular, the creditor should take the steps which it would be reasonable to expect it to take in the interest of fairness to reverse the consequences of unfairness, so that the relationship can no longer be regarded as unfair: see *Smith* at [27]-[29] and [66]. Whether that has, or has not, been done by the

creditor is a consideration in whether such an unfair relationship was in existence for the purposes of s.140A when the relationship ended.

In other words, determining whether there is or was an unfair credit relationship isn't just a question of deciding whether a credit relationship was unfair when it started. The question is whether it was still unfair when it ended; or, if the relationship is ongoing, whether it is still unfair at the time of considering its fairness. That requires paying regard to the whole relationship and matters relevant to it right up to that point, including the extent to which the creditor has fulfilled its responsibility to correct unfairness in the relationship.

In Mr U's case the relationship was ongoing when he referred his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman. At the time, Creation was responsible for the matters which made its relationship with Mr U unfair and for taking steps to remove the source of that unfairness or mitigate its consequences so that the relationship was no longer unfair. By relying in his complaint on the unfairness of the credit relationship between himself and Creation, Mr U therefore complained about an event that was ongoing at the time he referred his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman.

Therefore, taking into account DISP 2.8.2R(2)(a), I am satisfied it has been brought in time. I am otherwise satisfied the complaint is within the ombudsman service's jurisdiction to consider and it's not necessary to consider whether Mr U's complaint has been brought in time for the purposes of the alternative three-year rule under DISP 2.8.2R(2)(b).

Merits

The unfair relationship under s.140A complaint

When considering whether representations and contractual promises by E can be considered under s.140A I've looked at the court's approach to s.140A.

In Scotland & Reast v British Credit Trust [2014] EWCA Civ 790 the Court of Appeal said a court must consider the whole relationship between the creditor and the debtor arising out of the credit agreement and whether it is unfair, including having regard to anything done (or not done) by or on behalf of the creditor before the making of the agreement. A misrepresentation by the creditor or a false or misleading presentation are relevant and important aspects of a transaction.

Section 56 ('s.56') of the CCA has the effect of deeming E to be the agent of Creation in any antecedent negotiations.

Taking this into account, I consider it would be fair and reasonable in all the circumstances for me to consider as part of the complaint about an alleged unfair relationship those negotiations and arrangements by E for which Creation were responsible under s.56 when considering whether it is likely Creation had acted fairly and reasonably towards Mr U.

But in doing so, I should take into account all the circumstances and consider whether a Court would likely find the relationship with Creation was unfair under s.140A.

Given my above conclusions and bearing in mind the purpose of my decision is to provide a fair outcome quickly with minimal formality, and that I can consider the alleged misrepresentations under the unfair relationship complaint, I don't think I need to provide a detailed analysis of Mr U's s.75 complaint. Furthermore, this doesn't stop me from reaching a fair outcome in the circumstances.

What happened?

Mr U has said that he was told by E's representative that the system was free. Then when he realised he would in fact have to pay, he was told that the cost would be covered by the government. Mr U says that he became interested and contacted E after seeing an advert on social media saying that the solar panels were free.

Unfortunately, there is no documentary evidence from the sale, other than the credit agreement. So I have no paperwork to review to see if there was anything contained within them that made it clear that the solar panel system wouldn't be free. The loan agreement shows that both the total amount payable, and the monthly cost of the loan were clear to Mr U. However, there is no mention on the agreement of the potential benefits of the panels, or any government scheme which would make them "free".

For the solar panels to pay for themselves, and therefore potentially be considered "free", they would need to produce combined savings and FIT income of a little over £1,700 per year. Unfortunately, Mr U has not provided us with any evidence to show that the panels haven't produced that. He says, via his representative, that they haven't. But whether he has even provided enough information to substantiate that he has incurred any loss is debatable.

The testimony he has provided has been brief and lacking in detail. Over several months, both via his representative and directly, we have tried to make contact and gain more detail and information from Mr U. This has been unsuccessful.

I have been able to access some archived content from what I think is more likely than not to be E's website (based on the installer's registered address) from around the time of the sale, which I think is relevant when considering the likely content and tone of the information it would have given Mr U – both verbally and in writing. However, I have found no website content which says that the solar panels are free, or that the government will pay for them.

Overall, while I've carefully considered what Mr U says he was told, given what I've set out above, I'm not persuaded there's sufficient evidence Mr U was misled the system would be free, and that is what induced him to enter into the contract in question. Additionally, Mr U's claim that the system hasn't paid for itself has not been substantiated by him in any way. Therefore, I don't have the grounds to say that Creation's decision to decline the claim was unfair."

As mentioned above, Creation has accepted my findings and Mr U has not replied at all to my provisional decision. Therefore I have seen nothing which alters my findings as set out therein. And so it follows that I don't uphold this complaint

My final decision

For the reasons I've explained, I don't uphold this complaint and Creation Consumer Finance Ltd doesn't need to do anything.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr U to accept or reject my decision before 30 October 2024.

Siobhan McBride
Ombudsman