

## **The complaint**

Mr C has complained about the way Healthcare Finance Limited (“HFL”) dealt with a claim for money back in relation to dental treatment which he paid for with credit it provided.

## **What happened**

In February 2023 Mr C entered into a two-year fixed sum loan agreement with HFL to fund the provision of dental aligners from a third-party supplier that I’ll call “S”. The cash price was around £1,600 and Mr C was due to pay back the agreement with monthly payments of around £70. He said he was initially provided aligners for four months’ treatment. Mr C said he received a further two sets of aligners. Each set was for two months’ treatment. Mr C said he ordered another set around November 2023 but didn’t receive the aligners.

S went out of business in December 2023, so Mr C contacted HFL to make a claim, requesting a full refund. HFL considered the claim as a potential breach of contract under Section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 (“s.75”). HFL said it acknowledged S provided a lifetime guarantee but it didn’t think Mr C met the conditions for it because he’d not registered aligners; completed certain check ins and he didn’t order retainers, so it declined the claim. Mr C decided to refer his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman.

Our investigator pointed out it looked like S was supplying aligners to Mr C under the guarantee. HFL looked into things further and accepted that Mr C may have met the conditions for the guarantee because he was approved a ‘touch up’ treatment. It therefore offered to refund Mr C what it said was the value of one set of ‘touch up’ aligners – £220.

Our investigator thought HFL’s offer was fair, and it was not unreasonable of it to decline to refund the full cost of treatment.

Mr C didn’t agree. He said at no point did he think he’d completed what he considered to be his initial course of treatment. He said the further aligners were supplied as a continuation of his treatment and it was incorrect to say the further treatment was given as part of the guarantee. He said under the guarantee customers are entitled to one touch up per year if they meet the conditions. He had received two extension sets and was expecting another – all within a year. He said he’d provided evidence that was contrary to the data S had given HFL. He said he wasn’t happy with the results of the treatment and that products and services hadn’t been supplied under the agreement. He said the offer wasn’t fair and highlighted he thought there’d been a breach of contract. He also highlighted evidence that should have been available was lost because it was stored in S’s online application.

Mr C said he was going to stop making payments towards the agreement. HFL agreed to put things on hold while our service considered the complaint.

As things weren’t resolved the complaint has been passed to me to decide.

## **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 want to acknowledge I've summarised the events of the complaint. I don't intend any discourtesy by this – it just reflects the informal nature of our service. I'm required to decide matters quickly and with minimum formality. But I want to assure Mr C and HFL that I've reviewed everything on file. And if I don't comment on something, it's not because I haven't considered it. It's because I've concentrated on what I think are the key issues. Our powers allow me to do this.

I also want to say I'm very sorry to hear that Mr C is unhappy with the treatment. I can't imagine how he must feel, but I thank him for taking the time to bring the complaint.

What I need to consider is whether HFL – as a provider of financial services – has acted fairly and reasonably in the way it handled Mr C's request for getting money back. But it's important to note HFL isn't the supplier. I can't hold it responsible for everything that went wrong with S.

S.75 is a statutory protection that enables Mr C to make a 'like claim' against HFL for breach of contract or misrepresentation by a supplier paid using a fixed sum loan in respect of an agreement it had with him for the provision of goods or services. But there are certain conditions that need to be met for s.75 to apply. From what I've seen, those conditions have been met. I think the necessary relationships exist under a debtor-creditor-supplier agreement. And the cost of the treatment was within the relevant financial limits for a claim to be considered under s.75.

HFL has now broadly accepted Mr C's claim in one sense because it's offered him £220. So I've gone on to consider if there is persuasive evidence of a breach of contract or misrepresentation by S that means HFL should have offered more than it has. But I want to explain from the outset that I can only consider Mr C's complaint on that narrow basis – that is, whether it was fair and reasonable for HFL to respond to the claim by offering what it did.

Mr C entered into the agreement in February 2023, and it was expected to last a few months. He wasn't happy with the results of the treatment. Therefore, I understand S provided him with further aligners to try and improve the results for him. Another set was agreed around November 2023 but S went out of business, so Mr C didn't receive those aligners. Mr C's concerns are that he hasn't finished his treatment, and now cannot, as S is no longer in business. He believes he should receive a full refund.

### *Implied terms*

In cases such as this it is often complex to assess the quality of the service Mr C paid for. Results from such treatments are subject to many variables and there are generally disclaimers by the providers of such services, and accepted risks that results simply cannot be guaranteed.

While Mr C is unhappy with the results of the treatment, he's not provided supporting evidence such as an independent, expert opinion that sets out the treatment he paid for has not been done with reasonable care and skill as implied by the Consumer Rights Act 2015 ('CRA'). I'm mindful it is the manner in which the service was provided, rather than the results of the treatment, that is the crucial issue for me in considering whether there's been a breach of an implied term in relation to the service.

I'm not a dental expert, and neither is HFL. Without sufficient supporting evidence, I don't think HFL was unfair to not uphold the claim on the basis of a breach of an implied term of the contract because I've not seen enough to determine the service S offered wasn't carried

out with reasonable skill and care. I don't think the fact that S provided further treatment for refinement or 'touch up' in itself shows the original core treatment wasn't carried out with reasonable care and skill in line with the implied terms of the contract.

### *Express terms*

I also need to consider what I think Mr C's contract with S agreed to provide in terms of treatment so I can determine whether there has been a breach of an express term of it. I don't have a contract signed by Mr C as I understand they were kept in an online application that's no longer available. So there's a lack of evidence. But it's not in dispute Mr C was due to receive a set of aligners when he entered into the contract in February 2023 and that he received and used them. I think the core contract was for those set of aligners that he was due to use for a few months.

I therefore think Mr C completed the initial core treatment he'd paid for in February 2023. But he was unhappy with the results and S agreed to supply further sets of aligners – at no cost. Mr C said he received four months' worth of extra treatment. And he was expecting to receive more when S went out of business.

While I appreciate Mr C is put in a difficult position because some of the evidence isn't available, I can only consider how HFL acted based on what was able to be supplied. In the absence of a specific signed contract, I've looked at S's website from around the time Mr C entered into the contract. This says most treatment lasts between 4 to 6 months. It says if the customer hasn't achieved the results they want, and providing they've met certain conditions, the customer might be eligible for additional 'touch up' aligners. S gave Mr C further aligners.

Mr C has told us he thought S was providing him further aligners under the original treatment. But he's also told us he ordered retainers in May 2023. These are ordered when the initial core treatment finishes in order to stop the teeth from moving back to their original position. On balance, I think I can conclude from that the original treatment had ended. So I've thought about what services S was required to offer after the initial treatment, and whether there's been a breach of contract. Further aligners seem to be part of S's aftercare offering for further refinement (subject to dentist approval). It's not clear whether S gave Mr C further aligners because it thought the results could be improved upon or whether it was for some sort of failing on its side. We don't have sufficient evidence to conclude.

While I'm sympathetic Mr C was unhappy with the results, I don't think HFL had sufficient evidence to show S breached the express terms of the contract in respect of the result he achieved.

### *Guarantee*

On S's website from the time, the frequently asked questions ("FAQ") page has a section for further treatment under the guarantee. This suggests customers can request further aligner 'touch ups' after the core treatment at no cost on an ongoing once a year basis.

From what I can see the availability of a 'touch up' isn't the same as saying that particular results will be achieved. It seems like it's intended for refinement if possible. What the guarantee offered was the *possibility* of having further aligners provided that during treatment Mr C registered his aligners; wore them as prescribed; completed check ins; stayed up to date on payments. And that, after treatment Mr C bought retainers every 6 months and wore them as prescribed. A dentist also had to approve the treatment. My understanding is that a dentist would only do so if they assessed that further progress to straighten the teeth would be possible.

As I've explained, Mr C said a dentist approved further treatment in November 2023. Mr C has told us he ordered retainers in May 2023. So he'd have been due to order another pair before the end of the year, which he's not shown us he did. S also told HFL Mr C hadn't completed all his check ins or registered his aligners. Mr C has said he couldn't register the aligners he didn't receive, and that he did complete the checks ins. The evidence is conflicting. It's not clear Mr C did meet the conditions for the guarantee. We've seen other cases where S has told HFL the customer met the conditions. So I can't discount what HFL has told us. But in any event, HFL accepts he may have been eligible to be covered by the guarantee and it's made an offer for what it says is the value of a year's 'touch up' aligner.

Mr C thinks he should be provided with a full refund of the treatment costs. There is a potential breach identifiable because Mr C can no longer use the guarantee. However, given the stage of treatment he was at, the guarantee would never have given him the option of a refund of the core treatment costs. From what I've seen, a full refund was only available for the first 30 days after Mr C began the treatment around February 2023, and only if Mr C had not opened or used the aligners. I don't think it would be fair or reasonable for me to tell HFL that it should now provide Mr C with a full refund to recompense him for the potential breach that has happened. I don't think it was unreasonable for HFL to not offer to refund the value for what was provided under the core contract.

There are many ways in which the guarantee could have ceased to be of use to Mr C. He may not have done what was required in terms of buying retainers every six months. S may not have approved further aligners, although I appreciate Mr C said it had before it went out of business. The guarantee only gave the possibility of annual touch-up aligners – not the certainty that they would actually be provided.

Moreover, looking at things strictly, Mr C had already benefitted from the guarantee twice previously. Given the guarantee was only there to cover one set of treatment per year, it's not clear S was contractually obliged to have given Mr C the third set he was waiting for at that time.

I accept there's a potential loss, but it's not straight-forward to establish the value of the perceived loss. And I'm required to resolve the complaint quickly and with minimum formality. As I've explained, I don't think HFL is required to remedy a failure in relation to the core treatment or results Mr C received. But I think there's a possible loss because Mr C may have been able to utilise the guarantee.

HFL shared information from S saying the financial value of a 'touch-up' treatment is £220. It's difficult to know for certain if that's accurate. But this represents a refund of over 10% of the cost of the treatment. Considering we'll never know if Mr C would have continued to receive any benefits under the guarantee; taking into account he's received the core treatment, and that he said he was offered further treatment before S went out of business, I think HFL is acting fairly by offering this price reduction to remedy any potential loss. It seems like a fair compromise given I think the total amount paid was substantially for the core treatment.

While I am sorry to hear Mr C is unhappy, with s.75 in mind, I don't find there are grounds to direct HFL to refund him the full costs of the treatment. I think its offer is broadly fair in the circumstances. I should, however, point out Mr C doesn't have to accept this decision. He's also free to pursue the complaint by more formal means such as through the courts.

Finally, I note Mr C may have stopped making payments towards the agreement. I primarily need to consider what happened up to the point HFL issued its final response letter because those events are what it has had the chance to consider. Given the circumstances, if needed, HFL may wish to consider removing any adverse information from his credit file if

Mr C clears the arrears. But, for the avoidance of doubt, given I don't know exactly what's happened, HFL said it would put things on hold, and that these events took place after HFL issued its final response, I'm not deciding that aspect within this final decision. If Mr C is unhappy with how HFL treats him going forward, any new issues may be something our service is able to consider separately.

### **My final decision**

My final decision is that I direct Healthcare Finance Limited, to the extent not done so already, to pay Mr C £220.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr C to accept or reject my decision before 27 December 2024.

Simon Wingfield  
**Ombudsman**