

## The complaint

Mr M complains about the advice he was given in relation to the transfer of benefits from his defined-benefit ('DB') occupational pension scheme to a self-invested personal pension ('SIPP'). He says the advice was unsuitable for him and believes this has caused a financial loss.

Harbour Rock Capital Limited trading as Pension Access is now responsible for answering this complaint. So, for ease of reading I'll just refer to the business as 'Harbour' throughout my decision.

Mr M is being represented by a professional third party but for again ease of reading this decision I'll largely refer to representations as being made by Mr M.

## What happened

Mr M says he contacted Harbour after seeing an online advert and was offered a free pension review. Mr M signed a letter of authority on 23 April 2020 authorising his pension providers, including his DB scheme provider, to share information with Harbour.

On 4 May 2020, Harbour sent Mr M a welcome letter confirming it had contacted his pension providers for the information it needed. The letter said, "As you are currently under 55, we need to let you know that you will only be able to take tax free cash from your pension once you have reached the age of 55." It went on to explain that once it had received information from the pension scheme Harbour would "...contact you to confirm how much tax-free cash you can take from your pension, and to arrange your telephone appointment with one of our paraplanners." And it said, "After your appointment we will prepare and send you our recommendation detailing how your pension can help you to achieve your goals."

The administrators of the DB scheme sent Harbour details of Mr M's pension on 10 July 2020. It confirmed that the normal scheme retirement age was 65 and the cash equivalent transfer value ('CETV') of his pension benefits was £174,827.63.

Harbour completed a fact-find with Mr M via phone on 8 October 2020, to gather information about his circumstances and objectives. We've been provided a recording of the conversation as well as Harbour's notes.

Mr M was 54, single and had been out of work for around 11 months. At the beginning of the call, the representative from Harbour explained that they were a paraplanner, rather than an adviser, and their role was to gather information for the adviser to use. They said that, when the appointment had initially been booked it had been noted that Mr M wanted to access tax-free cash ('TFC') for now and then potentially draw lump sums in future years. Mr M confirmed that this was still what he wanted to do. He referred to having paperwork with him from Harbour, which said it could not help with some of his other pensions as these were pensions that it wouldn't recommend transferring. Mr M said he was fine with this and what he wanted to do really was just to access TFC from the DB scheme and then leave the remainder invested. The paraplanner said he could help Mr M do this.

The paraplanner explained the DB scheme would provide a guaranteed income but Mr M couldn't just take TFC from it and leave the rest invested so he'd have to give up the guaranteed income and transfer away. They then quoted the CETV and explained that the maximum available TFC would be around £43,000. Mr M asked in response if he'd be able to access that money on his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday, but Harbour explained the process could take some time.

The paraplanner noted that Mr M was in receipt of benefits and asked if he'd spoken to the benefits provider to see how this would be impacted by taking a lump sum. Mr M understood he could hold savings up to £16,000 before losing benefits. He asked Harbour what the way around this potentially was, to which it said he could take up to £16,000 TFC, work through that money and release more later to ensure he didn't breach the savings limit. Mr M said he wasn't sure if he'd be returning to work and would likely continue to rely on benefits – which he was concerned would then tip him over the threshold immediately if he took £16,000 TFC. The paraplanner said Mr M could instead take £15,000 just to be sure.

Mr M said he thought he'd just take the maximum TFC and potentially cease taking benefits. He said he wanted to get it all done and dusted today and didn't want to be going back and forth. And getting access to the funds was important and he would want to proceed regardless of the impact on his retirement provisions.

Mr M confirmed he didn't have any debts and he'd be looking to retire at around 60, at which point he'd likely start drawing an income from the pension but wouldn't be dependent on it as he expected to receive a sizeable inheritance from his father. He expected his outgoings in retirement to be the same as they were currently, which was around £750 per month. And Harbour estimated the state pension would cover this from age 67. Mr M said he'd be using the TFC to start his own business; in an area he'd worked in previously. He intended to use the TFC to purchase a vehicle, which he estimated would cost approximately £27,000, with the rest covering start-up costs and materials – with Mr M noting he'd had experience before starting a similar business.

Harbour said it needed to look at whether there were any other options for Mr M to achieve his aims and asked if he had any savings. Mr M was reluctant to tell Harbour and questioned why this was necessary. Eventually he said to write that he didn't have any savings. Mr M also said he didn't have any real disposable income at the end of each month. When Harbour pointed out that the information he had given about income and expenditure suggested he did have a surplus, Mr M again was initially reluctant to answer further questions. He then said to simply note that he gave any surplus to his sister. Mr M confirmed he owned his home outright but wouldn't consider and "didn't need" a loan instead of transferring and he didn't have any other assets he could liquidate to meet his needs. Mr M also stated he'd be comfortable in retirement and wouldn't be reliant on his pension savings to get by.

Finally, Harbour completed an attitude to risk ('ATR') assessment with Mr M. Harbour assessed Mr M's ATR as moderately cautious.

Harbour then had a further phone call with Mr M on 12 October 2020. He explained that having spoken to HMRC he had been made aware that if he took anything over £16,000, he'd lose all of his means tested benefits. So, he wanted to know if it would be better to take £16,000 or £15,000, so a benefit payment wouldn't then breach the threshold. Harbour said it didn't know and couldn't advise Mr M on that, but it could note for the adviser's consideration that Mr M intended to take £15,000 to be safe, which Mr M confirmed he wanted to do. He said he'd then potentially look to take a similar amount again, the following year. Harbour did tell Mr M he'd need to then double check that taking £15,000 wouldn't result in a partial reduction.

Harbour again asked what the £15,000 in TFC would be for and Mr M repeated this would be to start up a business. But he estimated he'd now only require £10,000 for a vehicle and £5,000 for other start-up costs.

Harbour wrote to Mr M on 14 October 2020. The letter said that since the fact-finding conversation, in which Mr M had explained he wanted access to TFC, it had completed its research and analysis. And having done so Harbour said, in bold writing in a red text box, "We strongly recommend that you do not proceed." It said the reasons for this were that Mr M would lose valuable benefits, he had limited alternative retirement provisions, and he could potentially still achieve his objective by taking money from his pensions which did not offer guarantees. Because of this it said its recommendation was that he retain his DB scheme because of the valuable guarantees he'd benefit from and because this wouldn't impact his means tested state benefits.

The letter had a section titled "What happens if you still want to go ahead?". This said if Mr M decided he didn't want to follow its recommendation, Harbour would have to treat him as an insistent client. Harbour said "We appreciate that 'insistent client' is a bit impersonal. It is a phrase all financial advisers must use to describe a client who instructs them to continue even though it is against their advice." Harbour then set out a brief overview of what Mr M would be giving up by transferring and an extract from its analysis, which said if he transferred, he could need to find an additional £140,405 on top of the transfer value, in order to buy an annuity that would match the benefits he was giving up.

Harbour said Mr M now had several options, as set out in the enclosed options form, which it asked him to complete and return. And it also enclosed an insistent client declaration for Mr M to complete if he decided to disregard its advice.

The options form set out two choices. Option 1 was to accept the advice and leave his pension where it was until retirement. Option 2 was to disregard the recommendation not to proceed and continue against Harbour's advice in order to release £15,000. Mr M completed the form on 21 October 2020, selecting option 2. He completed the insistent client form at the same time acknowledging he understood the advice was not to proceed, he'd be giving up guaranteed benefits for life and some of the risks involved. The insistent client form also included a section for Mr M to explain why he wanted to proceed in his own words. Mr M wrote, "Because I'm starting up a business with my pension money and feel this would make me more money long term. I am also disabled and do not think I could get to 60/65 years so I'm looking for now not the future. Thank you [Harbour] for your advice but those are my wishes."

Mr M spoke to Harbour on 6 November 2020. It confirmed that it had received his options forms back but wanted to check its understanding was correct. Mr M confirmed he'd chosen to go ahead against advice and that he was going to use the TFC to start a new business. Mr M repeated that he needed the money now, just wanted immediate access to £15,000, he didn't think his life expectancy would mean that he came to rely on the pension later in life anyway, but he was also due an inheritance that would mean he was comfortable regardless. Harbour asked Mr M to confirm his understanding of why the adviser had recommended he not transfer and what he was giving up. Mr M became agitated and said he just wanted access to TFC, had explained this three or four times, didn't want to be given the options again or keep repeating himself and didn't understand why he was being asked. But he confirmed he understood his existing pension would give him a regular pension until his death and he'd lose this guaranteed income by transferring.

Harbour then wrote to Mr M on 13 November 2020. The covering letter was titled "Your pension recommendation is enclosed". The letter said "Having considered your current situation and what you would like to achieve, we have already recommended that you do not

proceed. However, you wish to disregard this recommendation and proceed against our advice as an insistent client." With that in mind, Harbour said Mr M should transfer to a SIPP with a named provider as this would provide him access to TFC of £15,000 and the rest could be invested and managed by Harbour for Mr M with the aim of maximising performance.

The enclosed report reiterated that Harbour's recommendation was not to proceed with the transfer. And it again said some of the reasons for that were that Mr M had limited alternative retirement provisions, he'd be losing valuable guarantees, his benefits were likely to be impacted by releasing TFC and the cost of buying like for like benefits was significantly higher than the CETV. It repeated that Mr M was acting against its advice. But said, as he wanted to proceed, it recommended a SIPP as this would enable him to access the funds he wanted and meet his needs.

Mr M completed and signed application forms for the new SIPP on 19 November 2020. He also signed declarations confirming he was aware Harbour had recommended that he not proceed, he did not intend to follow the adviser's recommendation, he understood the guaranteed benefits the DB scheme would provide at age 65 which he'd be giving up and the risks involved.

I understand the guaranteed CETV expired before a transfer was completed. As a result, a new CETV was requested in December 2020. The new CETV was approximately £3,000 lower. Harbour wrote to Mr M highlighting the reduction, setting out that the cost of replicating the benefits he was giving up was still significantly higher than the CETV and repeating that it "strongly recommended that you do not proceed". But Mr M signed a declaration confirming he still wanted to proceed (and again acknowledging Harbour had recommended that he not do so) in January 2021, along with transfer application forms for the DB scheme.

I understand the transfer completed in March 2021 and the £15,000 TFC Mr M requested was paid to his bank account.

Mr M complained to Harbour in February 2024. In summary he said Harbour had provided negligent advice and shouldn't have facilitated the transfer and dealt with him as an insistent client. He said he hadn't understood the documents he'd completed, which his representative said was due to him being dyslexic which meant Harbour should have treated him as vulnerable, and he didn't appreciate the benefits that he was giving up by transferring.

Harbour didn't uphold the complaint. It said its advice to Mr M not to proceed with the transfer had been clear. The evidence from the time demonstrated he understood this and that he was being treated as an insistent client. And it said Mr M had understood the risks of transferring before deciding to proceed. And it told our Service Mr M had not disclosed anything at the time of the advice which suggested he wouldn't have understood the documents he was presented. It noted he had disclosed this information after the transfer, during an annual review. But he'd made the point that this didn't cause him to struggle with forms.

One of our Investigator's considered the complaint but didn't think it should be upheld, as he felt the available information indicated Mr M was aware that Harbour had not recommended a transfer, knew he was being treated as insistent and had been given clear information about risks and what he was giving up.

Mr M's representative didn't agree, in particular saying they thought the calls Harbour had with Mr M were rushed and didn't show he understood the transfer.

The investigator wasn't persuaded to change their opinion, so the complaint has been referred to me to make a final decision.

## 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've taken into account relevant law and regulations, regulator's rules, guidance and standards and codes of practice, and what I consider to have been good industry practice at the time. This includes the Principles for Businesses ('PRIN') and the Conduct of Business Sourcebook ('COBS'). And where the evidence is incomplete, inconclusive or contradictory, I reach my conclusions on the balance of probabilities – that is, what I think is more likely than not to have happened based on the available evidence and the wider surrounding circumstances.

I'd also like to reassure both parties that I've carefully considered all of the arguments made and the evidence provided. If I don't comment on or refer to everything that has been said this isn't meant as a discourtesy or because I haven't thought about it. Rather it is because my decision addresses what I think are the key points in deciding the complaint, bearing in mind our role as an informal dispute resolution service and my remit of deciding what a fair and reasonable outcome is.

The below is not a comprehensive list of the rules and regulations which applied at the time of the advice but provides useful context for my assessment of Harbour's actions here.

- PRIN 6: A firm must pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly.
- PRIN 7: A firm must pay due regard to the information needs of its clients, and communicate information to them in a way which is clear, fair and not misleading.
- COBS 2.1.1R: A firm must act honestly, fairly and professionally in accordance with the best interests of its client (the client's best interests rule).
- The provisions in COBS 9 which deal with the obligations when giving a personal recommendation and assessing suitability and the provisions in COBS 19 which specifically relate to a DB pension transfer.

In addition, the Financial Conduct Authority ('FCA'), states in COBS 19.1.6 that the starting assumption for a transfer from a DB scheme is that it is unsuitable. So, Harbour should have only considered a transfer if it could clearly demonstrate that the transfer was in Mr M's best interests.

Mr M has said that transferring his DB scheme pension was not suitable for him. But the correspondence around the transfer said Harbour agreed a transfer was not suitable, and it told Mr M this, but he opted to proceed anyway as an insistent client. I'll discuss the process by which Mr M was classed as an insistent client shortly. But on the point of whether a transfer was suitable, I agree it wasn't, but I don't see the need to address this in detail as both parties broadly agree.

Briefly, Harbour said in the letter of 14 October 2020 the reasons it didn't think a transfer was in Mr M's interests were broadly:

He would be losing valuable guaranteed benefits.

- Releasing TFC would mean his means tested benefits could be impacted.
- He had limited alternative retirement provisions.
- His objectives of raising a cash sum could be met through other methods including potentially by cashing in other, non-guaranteed pension arrangements.

I agree with these reasons why not transferring was suitable for Mr M. So, I've gone on to consider the process Harbour followed and whether it was fair for it to treat Mr M as an insistent client.

Since 2018, COBS 9.5A includes additional guidance on insistent clients. It defines who is an insistent client, with COBS 9.5A.2 saying a client should be considered an insistent client where:

- (1) the firm has given the client a personal recommendation;
- (2) the client decides to enter into a transaction which is different from that recommended by the firm in the personal recommendation; and
- (3) the client wishes the firm to facilitate that transaction.

The relevant part of COBS also sets out key steps for advisers to take. In respect of information to be communicated with an insistent client, COBS 9.5A.3 says:

- 1) Where a firm proceeds to execute a transaction for an insistent client which is not in accordance with the personal recommendation given by the firm, the firm should communicate to the insistent client, in a way which is clear, fair and not misleading, and having regard to the information needs of the insistent client so that the client is able to understand, the information set out in (2).
- 2) The information which the firm should communicate to the insistent client is:
  - a) that the firm has not recommended the transaction and that it will not be in accordance with the firm's personal recommendation;
  - b) the reasons why the transaction will not be in accordance with the firm's personal recommendation;
  - c) the risks of the transaction proposed by the insistent client; and
  - d) the reasons why the firm did not recommend that transaction to the client.

COBS goes on to set out what firms should do in respect of getting acknowledgement from the insistent client of their understanding, with COBS 9.5A.4 explaining:

- (1) The firm should obtain from the insistent client an acknowledgement that:
- (i) the transaction is not in accordance with the firm's personal recommendation; and
- (ii) the transaction is being carried out at the request of the client.
- (2) Where possible, the acknowledgment should be in the client's own words.

And COBS 9.5A.5 says "Where a firm gives a further personal recommendation in relation to the transaction proposed by the insistent client, the firm should make clear to the client that

this personal recommendation is distinct from, but does not affect the conclusions of, the initial personal recommendation."

Harbour gave Mr M a recommendation not to transfer in its letter of 14 October 2020, saying it strongly recommended that he not proceed. And I'm satisfied that the reasons it gave for this were clear –the loss of guarantees to Mr M, shortage of alternative retirement benefits, impact on his immediate income and his objectives could potentially be met in other ways meaning it wasn't suitable. Harbour not recommending a transfer was repeated across most of the documents relating to the transfer, including when it later recommended a SIPP where it said it believed Mr M's current circumstances did not justify the loss of the valuable guaranteed benefits. That later recommendation also made it clear it was recommending a SIPP because Mr M had said he wanted to disregard its advice. In my view Harbour made it clear this was distinct from its earlier advice. I'm also satisfied, based on the call recordings we've been provided, that it was explained to Mr M a transfer would be against Harbour's recommendation.

Mr M signed several declarations, at different times during the application process, which all made it clear that Harbour had recommended that he not proceed, he'd be giving up guaranteed income (and what that income was) and he was acting against its advice. Mr M's representative has said his dyslexia meant he didn't understand the information and 'jargon' being presented by Harbour. I've not seen any evidence of Harbour being made aware of this during the application process and it was not mentioned in the fact-finding call. So, I think it was reasonable for Harbour to rely on the declarations and that Mr M had understood them. But that notwithstanding, the call recordings I've listened to also make it clear in my view that Mr M was aware that Harbour had not recommended a transfer and that he was acting against its advice by proceeding.

One of the declarations Mr M completed included him writing in his own words why he wanted to proceed against the advisers recommendation. His representative has argued that what Mr M wrote didn't indicate an understanding of risk, rather that he wanted access to money. But it was an acknowledgement that the transfer was being carried out at his request, with Mr M noting "those are my wishes" and that it was against the recommendation that had been given.

I'm also satisfied that risks were explained to Mr M during the transfer process. The letter of 14 October 2020 included a comparison of what the DB scheme offered with a proposed new arrangement. This set out that guaranteed pension benefits would be lost, and that all investment risk would lay with Mr M, rather than the pension scheme. It also set out in monetary terms (and in a graph) that the cost of replacing the DB scheme benefits was approximately £140,000 more than the CETV Mr M had been offered.

This information was repeated in the report recommending a SIPP along with further explanations of risk. Harbour said in the report Mr M taking benefits now would mean he had less money to live on in the future and the pension benefit he eventually received could be less than those the DB scheme would guarantee. It also explained, amongst other things, that investment values could fall, Mr M's means tested benefits could be impacted and charges were likely to be higher after transferring.

Taking all of this into account, I think Harbour broadly acted in line with the guidance set by the FCA in COBS with respect of insistent clients. Mr M's representatives have said that Harbour should have refused to process the transaction on an insistent client basis as Mr M was an inexperienced investor and vulnerable due to his dyslexia and health conditions. Again, I've seen no evidence of Harbour having been made aware of Mr M being dyslexic at the time of the advice. And in the fact find I'd note Mr M didn't describe himself as inexperienced, rather he told Harbour he had good experience of investments. Ultimately

Harbour was entitled to decide whether it was willing to accept business from insistent clients and was allowed to do so under the rules in place. I don't think it would have been reasonable for it to decline to deal with Mr M on this basis because of the health conditions that meant he wasn't working. And I don't think it was necessarily unreasonable for Harbour to have treated Mr M as an insistent client here.

I do however think the process Harbour followed was not without flaws.

The initial welcome letter it sent to Mr M talked about releasing tax free cash at age 55, that it would establish how much Mr M could access and helping him meet his goals. I haven't seen a copy of the online advert Mr M followed which may have related to accessing money from his pensions. But I don't think referencing accessing TFC from Mr M's pension at the outset is consistent with COBS 19.1.6 and Harbour starting from the position that a transfer would not be suitable.

In its discussions with Mr M, Harbour tried to bridge the subject of raising money to start a business by other means. But Mr M was unwilling to discuss taking on borrowing secured on his home or alternatives. When Harbour said it didn't recommend a transfer, it said one of the reasons was that Mr M could potentially meet his objective through other means. And one of the things mentioned was releasing funds from his other pensions that didn't have guaranteed benefits. I don't though think that the advice went far enough into discussing or presenting these alternatives.

Harbour's role was to provide advice to Mr M about what was in his interests. This included challenging Mr M's pre-formed opinion where appropriate. I think it would've been appropriate, even though he'd dismissed this during the fact-finding call, for the advice to revisit the option of borrowing to achieve Mr M's objective – particularly as he'd reflected and concluded he needed significantly less start up money (£15,000 rather than approximately £43,000). I also think that its reference to Mr M's other pensions potentially providing an alternative solution ought to have included figures to illustrate exactly how this was a viable alternative. Because, without this, Mr M didn't have all of the information he may have needed to make an informed decision.

There also seems to have been an error in Harbour's transfer analysis. It has provided us with copies of three different analysis reports that it ran in respect of the transfer. The purpose of these were broadly to look at the value of the benefits the existing scheme provided and the cost and likelihood of being able to replicate them – to inform whether a transfer was in Mr M's interests.

In these reports, some of the figures used in respect of potential early retirement under the existing scheme appear to be incorrect. In particular the level of TFC that would potentially have been available for retirement under the DB scheme at ages 55 and 56. The reports Harbour produced quoted this figure as zero or a few hundred pounds. But the ceding scheme administrators have confirmed, based on the scheme rules and early retirement factors, the amount of TFC that could've been available at age 55 was approximately £12,700 and at 56 approximately £13,000.

Given Mr M's objective to release TFC this error could have been potentially significant. But the administrators also stated that a request for early retirement under the DB scheme would have been refused due to the level of guaranteed minimum pension and early retirement factors. So, while the analysis appears to have included errors, as Mr M would not have been granted early retirement under the scheme this wasn't an option available to him to meet his objectives. And so, Harbour was correct that in order to take TFC at age 55, Mr M needed to transfer his pension benefits. Nevertheless, this is a further example of the information recorded being incomplete.

I also think the initial advice letter presenting the option of disregarding that advice wasn't appropriate. As I've said, I'm satisfied that the advice itself was clear that Harbour did not recommend a transfer. But to present the option of disregarding that unprompted, in my view, somewhat undermined that advice. Likewise, providing options forms to complete, allowing Mr M to choose to disregard that advice straight away, made it easier for him to identify as an insistent client.

I think a more suitable process would have been for the advice not to transfer to have been presented on its own. I don't think the option of opting against that advice should have been presented unless Mr M had asked about this after having had time to consider the initial advice independently. And I think that the process Harbour followed in presenting the advice in this way didn't represent acting in Mr M's best interests.

So, I think there were some fairly significant issues and failings in the process that Harbour followed. But that doesn't mean that Mr M would always have been in a different position because of these failings. And so, I've thought about what I think would likely have happened if Harbour had followed a more appropriate process.

Having done so, while I know this will come as a disappointment to Mr M and his representative, like our Investigator I think, even if Harbour had acted differently, he would always have proceeded with the transfer.

Mr M has acknowledged that he initiated contact with Harbour after seeing an advert on social media. And it is clear from the initial discussions Mr M had with Harbour that he'd done so with gaining access to money from his pensions at age 55 in mind.

Mr M was clear when speaking to Harbour that he wanted to release TFC from his pension. He had a clear plan on what this money would be used for – to start a new business in a field he was familiar with. Mr M's representatives said Harbour should have challenged this plan and its viability further. But I wouldn't have expected it to do so given it recommended not transferring. And I also think its unlikely Mr M would've been willing to provide further information given his clear frustration with some of the information Harbour requested from him which he didn't think it needed to know.

As I've already mentioned, Mr M indicated he was unwilling to consider alternative ways of raising funds. Mr M also said on several occasions throughout his discussions with Harbour that he expected to receive a significant inheritance relatively soon. Additionally, he repeated, with confidence, that he would be comfortable in retirement regardless of what happened with this pension and accessing a lump sum was important to him regardless of the long-term impact. And I think he was clear that he did not consider the DB scheme to be essential or important. Mr M may have been misguided in that view, but based on the evidence I have I'm satisfied this was his opinion at the time.

When Harbour tried to discuss the advice with him, to ensure he understood it, Mr M became agitated and was clearly unhappy with what he considered as having to repeat himself. His representative has argued Harbour didn't adequately explain *why* it needed him to go through this information. But Mr M was clearly unhappy when Harbour tried to provide an explanation. And I'm satisfied, based on what I've seen and heard, that he knew Harbour had recommended that he not transfer and that he wanted to go ahead anyway. And he viewed Harbour's further discussions with him as barriers to achieving what he wanted.

Taking all of this into account, I think in the specific circumstances of Mr M's transfer, the evidence indicates that he wouldn't have been dissuaded by Harbour as he was clear that he wanted to transfer. So, even if Harbour had done more, I still think he'd have gone ahead with the transfer. And so, I don't require Harbour to take any action here.

## My final decision

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 Mr M to accept or reject my decision before 15 May 2025.

Ben Stoker **Ombudsman**