

## The complaint

Mr B complains that Barclays Bank UK PLC discriminated against him in applying blocks to his bank card and account, and in its calls in relation to a cash withdrawal that he had made.

## What happened

Mr B said Barclays blocked his bank card and account on 5 October and 26 November 2024. He wrote for clarification in October, and November 2024 about preventing a transfer. The latter incident is the subject of a separate complaint from Mr B to Barclays. Mr B said the first block followed his withdrawal of £2,000 from a Barclays ATM and was embarrassing and shameful as it stopped him making a payment at a family celebration.

Mr B called Barclays, but said he was asked too many questions which made him feel this was a fraud, and he ended the call. He called again and was put on hold and then asked why he had withdrawn the cash. Mr B said this was not the agent's business. The agent mentioned fraud and Mr B said he felt disrespected and told off about the withdrawal. Mr B said he would not have been treated like this if he had a British name or if his religion was 'Christian or Buddhist'. He felt discriminated against and treated like a criminal.

Mr B complained and said Barclays should look at a customer's profile before blocking. He asked why Barclays' agent lied that they left a message for him. He said Barclays' eventual response didn't take his complaint seriously and tried to keep him quiet by paying him £100.

Barclays responded that Mr B's cash withdrawal was flagged for checks as it appeared to be out of character, and it wanted to ensure he withdrew the funds and isn't a victim of fraud. It said it has a duty of care to investigate thoroughly to ensure it reached the right outcome, and it does so under the terms and conditions of the account. Barclays paid Mr B £100 as a gesture of goodwill in recognition of his embarrassment when his card was blocked.

Mr B wasn't satisfied with Barclays' response and referred his complaint to our service. He suggested discrimination from his name, religion or country and asked if Barclays analysed its system to check this. Mr B wanted to know why Barclays delayed its response and why it paid him £100. He said when Barclays' agents call customers they should give their full name, date of birth and their branch as customers don't know who is calling, *'especially when the caller has a foreign accent'*.

Our investigator didn't recommend the complaint be upheld. She said Barclays explained it has to ask questions, but Mr B didn't want to answer. She said on the second call the agent said blocks were applied after Barclays tried to contact Mr B. Mr B said the cash was to pay a workman, and Barclays removed the block. The investigator said Barclays is in line with its requirement to keep customers' money safe which may mean it blocks a legitimate payment.

As to discrimination, the investigator said only the courts have the power to make a finding under the Equality Act 2010. But we can decide if a consumer has been treated fairly, and we take relevant legislation and rules into account – including the Equality Act 2010. She said the questions were asked as part of Barclays' duty of care to ensure Mr B wasn't being scammed and Barclays had treated him fairly.

The investigator said Mr B's issues with Barclays app, and that decisions should be made by managers working in branches, and that calls to customers should require agents to provide their full details, and timeliness of Barclays' response aren't part of our role. These are proper to the financial regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

Mr B said he was very disappointed with this outcome and requested an ombudsman review his complaint. He reiterated that he had been treated as a criminal by Barclays.

### **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 was sorry to learn that what should have been a straightforward anti-fraud check has turned into a horrible and insulting experience for Mr B where he feels discriminated against and said he has been psychologically affected. Part of my role is to determine whether what took place was fair and reasonable and whether Barclays followed the anti-fraud process correctly.

Mr B said by blocking his account and asking him its security questions Barclays has treated him like a criminal, and this from a bank that he has trusted and has used for over 20 years.

Unfortunately, banking fraud is rife, and customers need to be aware of the potential to be defrauded at all times. It appears Mr B is aware of this potential as he ended his first call to Barclays because he suspected he was being defrauded. From this unhappy experience I am pleased the block on Mr B's card was removed by Barclays when Mr B called its fraud team back. I'm also pleased there's been no financial loss to him.

All financial institutions holding customer funds are required by the regulator, the FCA, to put in place systems that reduce and interdict transactions that may be carried out for the benefit of fraudsters. It is also clear from the terms and conditions of the account that Barclays had the authority to take blocking action on Mr B's account where it had reason to suspect a transaction. Mr B's cash withdrawal was very large, and Barclays deemed the transaction to be potentially suspicious as it was unusual, and out of character for his normal banking.

I have checked Barclays records of calls with Mr B and can see that it attempted to speak to him at the time to gain confirmation of the cash withdrawal, but he didn't answer and there was no message service. Barclays blocked the account pending confirmation of the cash withdrawal from Mr B, which meant his next transaction was blocked. Barclays actions were in common with those taken by all banks that I have seen in these circumstances, and I think this was a reasonable precaution to take.

Barclays' records show that when Mr B called the second time its agent discussed the block and explained why it had been applied. The agent asked Mr B to clarify how he withdrew the money and if there were any issues. Mr B confirmed he withdrew the cash and answered further questions about this, though he was clearly unhappy about this.

Questions concerning a customer's personal banking are by their nature likely to be intrusive, but they are designed to protect the safety of accounts. The questions to Mr B should be viewed this way as he was handing over a large sum of money. I don't know how many times this approach by Barclays and the other financial businesses will have prevented fraudsters from benefitting from customer accounts, but I'm sure that millions of pounds have been diverted from the alarming range of fraudulent enterprises by the type of questions put to Mr B.

Mr B said his complaint that Barclays discriminated against him; *'should be transferred to race and equality commission in the bank and also against the quality and race act'*. He would like to see evidence-based analysis to check how many foreign names are targeted and blocked, against British names. I've taken the Equality Act 2010 into account when deciding this complaint, because it is relevant law. But our service is unable to make findings on whether or not the way a business has operated or the service it has provided constitutes discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. If Mr B wants a decision that Barclays has acted with unlawful discrimination, then he would need to take this matter to court.

My response to Mr B's complaint concerning discrimination is that I think Barclays would have acted similarly with any other customer in his circumstances, and I have seen many examples of this. I have not found any evidence that Mr B was treated differently because of his name, religion or nationality.

I don't think Barclays' agents intended to cause Mr B embarrassment though Barclays recognised this had happened and credited him with £100 as a gesture of goodwill. I haven't seen anything to suggest Barclays made this payment to keep Mr B quiet. I agree with the investigator that Barclays' agents handled the calls well and tried to support Mr B. The FCA does not require Barclays or other businesses to provide customers with the full details of members of staff with whom they are speaking on the phone.

I hope that Mr B can see that financial businesses have a difficult balance to strike, as they have a responsibility to act on a customer's instructions, but also need to take steps to protect them from fraud. This means I would expect Barclays to block an account if it has concerns that the consumer or the bank may be at risk. As I think Barclays has acted within its regulatory responsibilities and treated Mr B fairly, I can't fairly require Barclays to take any further action in respect of Mr B's complaint.

### **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 Mr B to accept or reject my decision before 18 June 2025.

Andrew Fraser  
**Ombudsman**