

The complaint

Mr H complains about the security questions he was asked by HSBC UK Bank Plc when raising a query about his account, and about the various advisers he spoke to when he followed through with the complaint process.

What happened

Mr H initially contacted HSBC in late June 2024 about a payment he had tried to make from his current account. The adviser started the security process by asking him questions but when he couldn't answer a question about a previous address, they went on to ask further questions. After two such questions, Mr H asked how many further questions and he was told "one". But after that question the adviser started to ask him a further one. At this point Mr H asked to speak to a manager and after reiterating that a number of times, it was arranged that he would receive a call back from a manager within an hour. He didn't receive a call back and called again.

On the subsequent call, the adviser told Mr H that his account had been blocked because he had failed to answer a security question. Again he asked to speak to a manager and this time was put through. After three further telephone calls, Mr H thought his complaint was not resolved. When he contacted HSBC again about a week later, he had resolved his original query but still wished to pursue his complaint about the customer service he had received. He received a call back from a customer advocate, who talked through Mr H's complaint with him, having reviewed the phone calls. They explained that there wasn't any error on the bank's part but apologised for any problems in customer service he had received.

The advocate reiterated what was said over the telephone in a final response letter. They apologised for Mr H not receiving a callback from a manager. They said they would provide the phone recordings to the managers involved to give feedback. They credited £50 to his account for the inconvenience.

On referral to the Financial Ombudsman Service, our Investigator was satisfied with what HSBC had done when trying to put things right and this included the £50 payment of compensation. But they said that HSBC can learn from its mistakes and things certainly could've been better.

Mr H did not agree and felt that all of his complaints had not been investigated. As a remedy he would like HSBC to carry out a full reinvestigation of his complaints, and increased compensation.

The matter has been passed to me for an Ombudsman's consideration

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.

The Financial Ombudsman Service is set up to resolve complaints with minimum formality. I mean no discourtesy too Mr H but I should advise him that although I've considered everything he's said, and listened to the phone calls provided, I'm not required to cover every point of complaint. Our rules allow me to take this approach.

From the summary supplied to HSBC and to our Investigator, I understand Mr H's main points of complaint to be:

- Being misled about the number of security questions to be asked.
- Repeatedly asking to be transferred to a manager.
- Not receiving a promised callback from a manager.
- He wasn't advised his account had been blocked.
- Customer service received during the calls and the length of the calls.
- Accusing him of being abusive and intimidating the advisers.
- Failing to investigate his complaint properly.

security questions

When Mr H made his initial call to HSBC, he was asked a security question about his previous address which he could not/would not answer. The adviser said that there would be further security questions. When Mr H asked how many, the adviser said "three" and when they'd asked two of those questions they said there would be one further question. Mr H answered that and the adviser then attempted to do a follow up question. Mr H asked to speak to a manager. To be clear I don't think there was any error in HSBC's process here. And I think that the final question appeared to be a follow-up to the previous question. Nevertheless I can understand Mr H's annoyance and the adviser should have made themselves clearer. I bear in mind that this refusal escalated the whole situation.

transfer to a manager

Mr H did repeatedly ask to be referred to a manager, and the adviser did put him on hold to do this. When they reverted to Mr H to explain that a manager wasn't then available, he simply repeated his request although the adviser did tell him that he would have to go through security again. I don't think there was anything wrong with the adviser's conduct here, Mr H didn't in my view give them a chance to explain the process.

manager callback

Mr H was told that a manager would call him back, and this didn't happen. I think HSBC was at fault here.

blocking account

I understand that the initial adviser did then block Mr H's account. This was on the grounds that he hadn't completed security and, whilst this wasn't an error in HSBC's process, he could nevertheless have been told this would happen. I say that with the caveat that the said adviser felt intimidated by Mr H so it's likely that they would've been concerned about telling Mr H that.

length of calls and customer service

The calls were lengthy although having said that, this was only in my view because of Mr H's approach to the calls, repeatedly criticising the advisers. On at least three occasions the advisers terminated the calls. I don't disapprove their doing that, I'm satisfied that it was appropriate in the circumstances. As to the customer service Mr H received during those calls, whilst some of the responses could be said to have been a bit sharp, bearing in mind that feedback was given to the managers concerned I would not propose to require any further action by HSBC in that respect.

accusation of intimidatory or abusive behaviour

HSBC's customer advocate said to Mr H in their final response letter: "*I understand you were frustrated and this situation caused you inconvenience, however, please can you be mindful when you contact us. We do not tolerate customers being intimidating or abusive to our telephone agents.*" I also understand Mr H's frustration and I do accept that he wasn't abusive. But several of the advisers concerned did feel intimidated, as I've set out above.

investigation of complaint

Mr H has said that the customer advocate didn't investigate his complaint properly, and that they didn't listen to all the telephone calls prior to speaking to him. He also says that, after calling back it was agreed that another adviser would review his complaint which didn't happen. I've noted that the customer advocate had a long call with Mr H. And I think they discussed the main points of the initial telephone calls. Which in my view was really the essence of his complaints. And whilst HSBC didn't carry out a review using another adviser it did review his complaints again, which I think was a fair and reasonable approach to take.

remedy

With regard to the remedy Mr H wants, I think that having referred his complaint to this service, it wouldn't be appropriate to refer the matter back to HSBC to carry out another investigation. As I'm concerned with the individual complaint, I don't have the power to require HSBC to change its processes in respect of security questions or blocking accounts. Having considered the matter in full I think that the payment of £50 was fair and reasonable compensation to pay.

My final decision

I don't uphold the complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr H to accept or reject my decision before 16 April 2025.

Ray Lawley
Ombudsman