

The complaint

Mr S complained about the service provided during a phone call on 4 February 2025 when he phoned Starling Bank Limited ('Starling') to find out why he was unable to withdraw money from a cash machine using his new debit card.

What happened

Mr S' attempts to use his debit card to make a cash withdrawal were declined by Starling. When Mr S phoned Starling about this, the call handler told Mr S that his card wasn't showing as activated. The call handler talked Mr S through the in-app activation process and confirmed to Mr S that his debit card was now activated and could be used to withdraw cash.

Mr S thought he'd previously done what he needed to activate the card and said it was too late and he couldn't go back to the cash machine. He was unhappy with the way he felt he'd been treated by the call handler and became upset when he thought the call handler had laughed at his request to speak to a manager. The call was terminated while on hold pending transfer to a manager.

Mr S called back around 20 minutes later and spoke to a different call handler who logged details of his complaint.

Starling offered to resolve Mr S' complaint on the basis that feedback would be provided to the call handler and Mr S would receive £50 compensation. Mr S declined this offer. This led to Starling reviewing Mr S' complaint afresh.

In its final response, Starling didn't agree that Mr S' debit card had been declined due to any bank error. It said the card wasn't activated at the time and that the call handler had correctly explained the position to Mr S and then helped him complete the activation process so he could use his card. But Starling agreed that the call handler could have better handled the call in some key respects and said it was very sorry about the poor service he'd received. Starling also confirmed that the call handler would be given feedback to ensure this didn't happen again.

Our investigator thought Starling had done enough to put things right and didn't recommend any further action. Mr S disagreed and asked for an ombudsman review, so his complaint comes 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.

After listening to the call recordings provided and thinking about everything I've been provided with, I agree with the investigator that Starling has already done enough to put things right for Mr S. I will explain my reasons.

It's my understanding that Mr S has a number of different concerns about what happened on 4 February 2025. I've briefly summarised and expressed in my own words what seem to me

to be Mr S' main concerns and my focus is on what I think are the key issues here. Our rules allow me to do this and this approach simply reflects the informal nature of our service. It doesn't mean I haven't considered all the evidence and what's been said – it just means I haven't needed to specifically refer to everything in the same detail as Mr S in order to reach a decision in this case.

Mr S' debit card was declined when he tried to use it to withdraw money at a cash machine

My findings are made on a balance of probabilities, in other words, what is more likely than not, based on the evidence provided by both the parties. Mr S thought he'd already activated the debit card himself. But, on balance, I think he is likely to be mistaken about this. I say this because Starling's system had sent in-app messages to Mr S when he'd attempted unsuccessfully to use the card, telling him that he needed to activate the card in the app first. Both the call handlers Mr S spoke to on 4 February 2025 said their screens showed that the card hadn't been activated when Mr S had tried to use it. I think that's borne out by the fact that when the first call handler took Mr S through the activation process, this enabled the card to be successfully activated – suggesting it hadn't been activated prior to that.

It's apparent to me from listening to the call that Mr S found it tricky using the app to activate his debit card. The call handler had to take him step by step through the process and often needed to repeat instructions. So I don't think it's very likely that Mr S had already completed this activation process on his own.

Mr S had received a new debit card and it was up to him to activate it before he could use it. This is a basic security measure which helps keep clients' money safe and part of Starling's terms of business, which Mr S would've had to agree to in order to use a debit card. So I don't find that the fact Mr S' debit card was declined is a good enough reason for me to uphold this aspect of his complaint.

The way the (first) call handler treated Mr S when he phoned about not being able to use his debit card

I'm sorry that Mr S found this call so upsetting. I've listened to the call recording several times to try to understand why things went so wrong for Mr S during this call – bearing in mind that the call handler resolved the issue Mr S phoned up about when he couldn't use his debit card.

Mr S objected to the call handler interrupting him on occasion. I think it's fair to say, from what I can hear, that both parties found themselves sometimes speaking over each other when attempting to correct what they thought was a misunderstanding on the part of the other. The call handler apologised when Mr S complained he was being interrupted. I don't consider that this is a reason for me to uphold the complaint.

At one point in the call, Mr S complained that the call handler was simply repeating himself and the call handler could hear Mr S was becoming upset. The call handler said he was sorry and that he was simply trying to ensure that Mr S had a proper understanding of the situation. Mr S appeared not to have understood or accepted the fact that his debit card had been declined because he hadn't activated it. I am satisfied that the call handler's efforts to try and explain to Mr S that his debit card hadn't been declined due to any 'mistake' by Starling were reasonable in the circumstances.

Mr S became increasingly frustrated when he felt the call handler should've actioned a complaint he said he wanted to make and instead pressed him for further information. From what I can hear, I don't believe the call handler was trying to put any obstacle in the way of Mr S complaining. Indeed, the call handler said he was '*... here to help*' and '*...more than*

happy' to raise a complaint on Mr S' behalf. I think the call handler was simply trying to understand what Mr S wanted to complain about, after he'd phoned about not being able to use his debit card and the call handler had fixed that problem. I've taken into account that the call handler suggested dealing with the impasse reached by sending an email instead – which seems reasonable to me.

At one point Mr S asked the call handler to put him through to his manager – and he became very upset when he thought the call handler had laughed at him. Whilst I can hear that the call handler made a noise, it doesn't sound to me like he was laughing at Mr S. To my ears, it sounds more like frustration at the situation because the call handler genuinely couldn't understand why Mr S was unhappy when he'd dealt successfully with the problem he called about – and he expected that his manager would tell Mr S the same information that he'd provided. Starling acknowledged that any interpretation of what happened here is necessarily subjective – and like me, doesn't believe the call handler was laughing at Mr S. And that's what the call handler assured Mr S during the call when he was challenged on this point. But I agree that it was unhelpful for the call handler to have reacted this way. That said, I think Starling's apology for this is fair and reasonable to redress this aspect of Mr S' complaint, coupled with the feedback provided to the call handler.

Mr S also complained about being cut off by the call handler when he was put on hold. But from what I can hear, that isn't what happened and Starling says it can evidence that the disconnection wasn't done by the call handler. I don't know what happened – possibly the call dropped due to a poor signal. But in any event, I haven't seen or heard enough to say that the call handler ended the call unfairly or unreasonably by putting the phone down on Mr S. From what I can hear, the call handler was frustrated himself to find that the call had dropped when he returned to speak to Mr S.

In order to uphold Mr S' complaint I would have to find that Starling didn't treat Mr S in a fair and reasonable way overall or that it hadn't done enough to put poor service issues right. Here, for the reasons explained above, I agree with the investigator's assessment that some aspects of the service provided were 'below par'. In particular, I think the (first) call handler could've managed the conversation more effectively so that Mr S wasn't given any reason to feel he was being laughed at. And given that the second call handler was able to log Mr S' complaint over the phone without the specific complaint details that Starling asked for, the first call handler could have done this too.

Starling agrees the call handler could have provided a better service. So I've thought about what's fair and reasonable to put things right in this situation.

I've taken into account that the call handler dealt effectively with Mr S' problem with his debit card, demonstrating patience and consideration when it was apparent that Mr S was finding the process difficult. I consider that the difficulties that arose during the call were simply due to the call handler lacking the necessary skills and training to manage challenging behaviour more effectively.

There's more information on our website, but briefly, when thinking about whether an award of compensation is fair, our starting point is that we're all inconvenienced at times in our day-to-day lives – and a certain level of frustration and minor annoyance is expected. An award of compensation doesn't automatically follow just because a financial business hasn't dealt with something as well as it should've done. I'd need to be persuaded that the impact on Mr S of failings on Starling's part was more than someone would expect to experience as part of everyday life – and I don't think it was.

Mr S found having to go through Starling's initial verification process wasn't straightforward for him. This meant it took some time to successfully pass security and it sounds like he was

already feeling frustrated before the call handler was able to engage on the matter he'd called about. I'm sorry that going through security was an unsatisfactory experience for Mr S – but I can't hold Starling responsible for this. I wouldn't reasonably expect any bank to discuss private account information over the phone without first establishing the caller's identity. And I don't consider that Starling's poor service caused Mr S to suffer any more significant distress or inconvenience than not being able to use his debit card – and that wasn't Starling's fault.

I haven't been provided with anything to show that what happened had any wider impact on Mr S or that he was caused financial detriment. The call handler said sorry to Mr S more than once during the call on 4 February 2025. Starling wrote apologising to Mr S and offered a £50 goodwill payment – which Mr S rejected. Feedback has been provided to the call handler. Looked at overall, I am satisfied that Starling has already taken responsibility for addressing shortcomings it identified on its part and done enough to put this right.

Starling has however confirmed to us that it is holding open its offer to pay £50 to Mr S. So Mr S should contact Starling direct to take up this offer if he changes his mind.

My final decision

My final decision is that I do not uphold this complaint. It is up to Mr S to contact Starling Bank Limited if he decides he wants to accept £50 in full and final settlement of this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr S to accept or reject my decision before 13 May 2025.

Susan Webb
Ombudsman