

The complaint

Mr I complains that Barclays Bank UK PLC didn't protect him from significant financial harm, as a vulnerable customer, in relation to a current account and overdraft facility he has with it.

Mr I is being represented in bringing his complaint to this Service. However, for ease, I will refer to any submissions made by the representative, as being those made by Mr I himself.

What happened

In November 2024, over a short space of time, Mr I says that Barclays allowed him to spend a substantial amount on gambling transactions, which he feels Barclays should have prevented. Mr I says on one occasion, he spent over £9,000 in an hour and he believes he wouldn't have lost so much money if Barclays had stepped in sooner.

In February 2024, Mr I says that he made Barclays aware of some very difficult personal circumstances which had caused him to suffer emotionally and mentally. This meant that he required help keeping his finances in order. He says he was told by the advisor that his account would be closely monitored.

To put things right, Mr I would like Barclays to reimburse him the money he has lost – as he feels that he wouldn't have been in this position if Barclays had intervened.

In summary, Barclays said that Mr I was liable to pay for the transactions as they were made by him. It said that a vulnerability flag wouldn't have prevented the transactions from going through on the account. Barclays offered to place a gambling block on the account, however it explained that this wouldn't likely prevent all gambling transactions from going through as it would depend how these had been processed by the merchant. It also said that Mr I might need to approve the transactions using his app.

An Investigator considered what both parties had said, but ultimately, they didn't think Mr I's complaint should be upheld. They explained that there hadn't been any gambling transactions on the account prior to November 2024, and so there was no reason for Barclays to have added a gambling block to the account prior to this. And they didn't think there was any need for Barclays to have monitored the spending on Mr I's account, or that it should have stepped in sooner.

Mr I didn't agree with the Investigator's view. I have summarised his main points below:

- He hasn't been provided with a list of the gambling transactions to show what time and date the transactions were processed. So he is unable to evidence the speed and volume of the transactions.
- Multiple high-value transactions were carried out in a short space of time – around two hours. He eventually went into his overdraft and had transactions declined. At this point, it was reasonable of Barclays to have intervened, especially given that he was entering into unauthorised borrowing at a high rate of interest.
- When Barclays contacted Mr I on 17 November 2024, he told Barclays he was

processing a transaction because “something had happened”. This response should have prompted Barclays to ask him more questions, and had it done so, he would have disclosed that he was struggling and making gambling-related transactions.

- In the moment the transactions were taking place, Mr I says he was in a dissociative or trance like state and was not fully aware of the financial damage taking place. A call or a message from Barclays would have disrupted this state and helped prevent further loss.

Because an agreement couldn't be reached, the complaint has been passed to me to decide on the matter.

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.

Clearly Mr I has been through a very difficult time over past few years. I am truly sorry to have read about the difficult circumstances he's described. I have kept this in mind when deciding Mr I's complaint. I don't wish for my decision to downplay or disregard what Mr I has told us. But being independent means that I need to take a step back and consider the evidence provided by both parties, alongside what I think would be a fair and reasonable outcome in the circumstances. And having done so, I don't uphold Mr I's complaint.

Most banks don't manually monitor the spending activity on accounts – there isn't anything inherently unfair about this. So, unless there was something which caused it to review an account, for example, the merchant code flagged specific transactions, or spending habits or patterns triggered its fraud detection systems, it wouldn't automatically know that an account had been used for excessive gambling transactions, or that there was a potential problem.

I have reviewed some of the statements of Mr I's account, and it is clear that it was being used for a large amount of gambling between 9 November 2024 and 16 November 2024 - there weren't any excessive gambling transactions that took place prior to this. I accept that the transactions may have happened at a different date, but I don't think the dates or times the transactions were completed makes a difference to the outcome of this complaint.

I think it's clear that there was a change in spending patterns over the dates mentioned. There was a large volume of transactions going out to gambling sites, which was also evident from the merchant codes used. But there were large credits coming into the account too, which appear to be from gambling sites.

I appreciate that, in Mr I's view, the volume of high value transactions in a short space of time, ought to have triggered Barclays' systems to contact him. In some cases, I might agree with this. But in this case, the gambling transactions were new to the account and so there was no reason for Barclays to have questioned the transactions when they happened over such a short period of time. In addition to this, Mr I was using his own funds for the transactions (as opposed to an overdraft facility), so the account wouldn't likely have triggered with Barclays as being in financial distress. As well as the large volume of transactions going out of the account, there was also a large amount coming in. Again, this wouldn't have likely triggered any cause for concern relating to financial strain.

When I've looked at the running balance on Mr I's account, there is no suggestion that he used his overdraft facility to make the transactions. There's also no evidence of declined transactions. It is possible that some of the transactions were declined due to a lack of available funds. But even if the overdraft was used, and even if there were declined

transactions, in this case it wouldn't change my view that there was nothing more Barclays should have done here. I say this because there was clearly no sustained overdraft use, alongside gambling transactions. And even if there was a transaction declined, it doesn't automatically follow that Barclays ought to have questioned the spending on the account.

I can also see from looking at the notes on Mr I's account that on 16 November, Barclays' fraud prevention team flagged a payment for £10,000 – it appears that this payment was for something unrelated to the gambling. I can see that Barclays were able to speak to Mr I on 17 November about the transaction, which he confirmed was genuine. Mr I says that more should have been done during this call to question him about the transactions on the account. And if Barclays had probed him more, it would have prevented further gambling transactions on the account. I've thought carefully about this point, but the gambling had stopped by this point – the last gambling transaction I've seen appears to have been processed on 16 November, so I don't think it likely that Barclays probing more during this call would have led to a different outcome.

I note that Mr I has raised concerns in relation to a vulnerability flag being applied to his account, which he feels ought to have meant that Barclays monitored his account more closely. Generally, the purpose of a vulnerability flag is to notify a firm when someone is in a position of vulnerability, and it may be that the firm considers adjusting its communication style as a result. But this wouldn't necessarily mean that the transactions on the account are monitored more closely. Nor would it mean that Mr I would have been prevented from spending the funds in his account. I have listened to the call where Mr I notified Barclays of his situation. The advisor runs through different types of support it could offer, for example, be more patient, speak more calmly. But there is no indication during the call that Mr I's account would be monitored more closely. The support offered seems to be in relation to how it communicates with Mr I. So I can't fairly find here that Mr I was under the impression that his account was going to be monitored more closely for this type of scenario.

Taking everything into account here, I can't fairly find that Barclays did anything wrong in not stepping in to help Mr I sooner. I say this because the transactions all happened over a relatively short space of time, from what I understand the account hadn't previously been subjected to any other forms of compulsive spending, while there were high value and frequency of transactions leaving the account there were also high value and high frequency of transactions coming into the account, and the account didn't show obvious signs of financial stress which ought to have prompted Barclays to step in sooner.

I haven't seen anything that makes me think that Barclays ought to have been aware of a potential problem with the spending on the account until Mr I explained this to Barclays. Mr I has confirmed himself that he didn't explicitly tell Barclays about the difficulties he was facing until 18 November 2024, which was after the gambling had stopped. At this point, Barclays explained how a gambling block could be applied to the account, which is what I would have expected it to do in the circumstances. I can also see that a note has now been applied to Mr I's account to reflect what he told Barclays about his circumstances and how this could affect the way he spends – the note currently suggests that no specific support is required, but I suggest Mr I contact Barclays if this changes or is incorrect.

I appreciate this decision will be incredibly disappointing for Mr I. I can understand why he feels that Barclays should have done more. But ultimately, Barclays has done what I would have expected it to, in that when it became aware of a problem, it explained the steps Mr I could take to prevent further transactions from going through. And as I've explained, I don't think Barclays ought to have done more at an earlier point in time.

My final decision

For the reasons set out above, I don't uphold Mr I's complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr I to accept or reject my decision before 18 September 2025.

Sophie Wilkinson
Ombudsman