

The complaint

Miss F complains that Santander UK Plc delayed and blocked her account for nine months as it was investigating a possible scam payment. And that it asked her unreasonable questions, during its investigation.

What happened

In January 2024 Miss F attempted to make an international payment on her account in connection with helping someone she knew obtain a visa. The transaction triggered an automatic fraud alert, and her account was blocked for online payments. She was later contacted by a fraud adviser at Santander and was questioned in detail about the intended payment. Santander requested that she provide copies of certain documents. The adviser still thought that in light of the nature of the intended payment it was a scam. They asked Miss F to provide further documents.

Miss F contacted Santander in branch in March 2024 to indicate that she did not have the documents. Santander decided to invoke the Bank Protocol which meant the police were asked to investigate. I understand that a police officer visited Miss F in mid-April 2024, and he reported back to Santander that he had no concerns about the payment.

Unfortunately though this report was in April 2024, Santander said it hadn't received it. Further Miss F made no contact with Santander until late August 2024. Santander then chased the police officer concerned who forwarded his report. As a result, it unblocked the account, Miss F having already made the payment by another means. It had initially paid her £50 compensation in February as a goodwill payment and then in September 2024 a further £125. It said it hadn't made any error in relation to the initial fraud investigation.

On referral to the Financial Ombudsman Service, our Investigator said the payment made was fair in respect of the customer service issues Miss F experienced.

Miss F didn't agree and 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.

I can't criticise Santander for blocking the initial payment Miss F wanted to make or for blocking her account. As she's been made aware all banks have to have in place a process which deals with possible frauds and scams. The system, which is automatic will be triggered if certain factors are present in the making of a payment. I can't tell Miss F what those are but I'm satisfied there were clear concerns about the payment she was trying to make.

I also can't say that Santander's investigation of the payment was unfair. I know the adviser asked Miss F what she felt to be intrusive questions. But there were very real concerns

because of the nature of the payment and who it was going to, that she was being scammed. From her point of view, I understand that she knew what she was doing and was wholly satisfied that the payment was genuine. From the adviser's point of view, I think it was reasonable for them to ask for documents which Miss F provided.

I can see that the adviser made enquiries to check the position concerning payment for the particular visa in question. And I understand Miss F felt it was unreasonable to then ask for further documents or to ask her questions which she didn't know the answer to. But if there were concerns of a possible scam then the fact that she couldn't answer the questions or provide the documents could lead the adviser to think their suspicions were correct.

As for reporting to the police, this is something Santander can do if, following a visit in branch, its staff were concerned that she was the victim of a scam. And as its investigations hadn't satisfied it that the payment was genuine then again I don't think Santander should be criticised for doing this.

The police officer reported back to Santander on 18 April 2024. We know this because he forwarded a copy of this e-mail to Santander on 27 August. I share Miss F's concern that this e-mail was apparently not received by Santander when it was originally sent. We don't have the power to carry out forensic examination of documents so we have to rely on businesses giving accurate accounts. I've seen a copy of the police report but this must remain confidential. Our powers allow us to keep documents confidential if parties request it. I can say that it supports the view that Miss F was not being misled or scammed.

Clearly Santander should have kept the matter open even if Miss F didn't chase it up. But after a visit to the branch on 6 April, she didn't make any contact with Santander until late August. I know she sent a text to the police officer concerned in May 2024 but he didn't respond.

In considering any compensation, I appreciate that Miss F was caused some distress and inconvenience. And I understand that she spent a lot of time on telephone calls and branch visits. But I can't say that Santander did anything wrong from the time the account was blocked until it made the report to the police. So I think it was an unfortunate consequence of the fraud procedure. As I've noted, Miss F didn't chase up the matter for nearly five months. Whilst I understand her view that it was unnecessary to block the account, if it was a scam then the scammer frequently will ask victims to move monies elsewhere. I note the account was still open for bill payments and ATM withdrawals and she told our Investigator that she had access to other accounts and funds.

I think Santander was at fault for not chasing the matter up, so it should pay compensation. But I think in the circumstances of this case the £125 paid, on top of the previous goodwill payment of £50, was fair and reasonable. So I won't require Santander to take any further action

My final decision

As I think that Santander UK Plc has already paid sufficient compensation, I don't uphold the complaint

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Miss F to accept or reject my decision before 23 July 2025.

Ray Lawley
Ombudsman

