

The complaint

Mr M complains that Santander UK Plc blocked his account causing him inconvenience. Mr M would like to have full access to his account restored.

What happened

Mr M opened an account with Santander in April 2025 and soon afterwards Santander recorded alerts on the account due to numerous calls, and Mr M being unable to pass identity checks. Santander said some calls evidenced that Mr M is vulnerable to scams.

In early May 2025 Mr M went to a branch of Santander and attempted to withdraw cash and complained when Santander discussed this with him and wouldn't allow the full withdrawal. Mr M said Santander's refusal to allow him to access his funds implied that he was a liar and it had no right to take this action and put restrictions on his account, and he complained.

Santander said Mr M has had an account since 2008 and he fell victim to a scam in 2023. Since opening his current account, Santander initially blocked it as a precaution, and he was subsequently placed on the 'Safeguarding Pilot' for his own protection. Santander said it understood this caused Mr M problems, but it acted in line with banking policy as it was concerned a third party may be trying to take advantage of him. Santander said its branch had contacted the police, and its fraud team to support him and protect his funds.

Santander said it had given Mr M some access to cash at this time and had then advised him that although there were still some concerns, it would lift some restrictions to give him access to further funds. And this would continue to be reviewed.

Mr M wasn't happy with this response and referred his complaint to our service. Our investigator didn't recommend the complaint be upheld. He said Santander had genuine concerns about Mr M's transactions and restricted his account. Mr M still had access to funds, but Santander was trying to prevent him from falling victim to scams. The investigator said this was done with Mr M's best interests at heart, to protect him and his account.

Mr M remained unhappy and requested an ombudsman review his complaint. He said he understood the investigator's position, but he had been 'suicidal three times outside the [named] branch' in one week. He described his mental health disorders and said the stress caused by Santander's actions has been unbearable and he was left penniless.

Mr M said he may have told us he wasn't being scammed, and Santander's staff had given him cash to tide him over, but they were unsympathetic to his serious predicament. He said he has sued Santander for defamation of character as he had been branded a liar in branch.

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.

Mr M feels that Santander do not have the right to restrict access to funds within his account. He said its actions have left him in an unbearable situation.

I am grateful to Mr M for sharing additional information about his vulnerabilities, and I sympathise with him for the difficulties he has faced and continues to face. Having looked at all the circumstances of his complaint, I agree with the investigator that it is in relation to these vulnerabilities that Santander took the protective measures with regard to his account.

To explain, on Mr M's visit to the branch in May 2025, Santander's staff had what appeared to be genuine concerns that a third-party might be trying to take advantage of Mr M. The branch staff contacted the police who also had concerns, and a referral was made to Santander's fraud operations team. Santander explained that this was to ensure it was supporting and protecting Mr M's funds.

Santander reviewed Mr M's account including calls he made to the bank in 2024 which it said showed he is vulnerable to scams. Santander was concerned about cash withdrawals that Mr M was attempting to make and thought he may be falling victim to a scam or financial abuse and so it restricted access to the funds in his account. I can see contact was made with Mr M soon after and some restrictions were lifted from his account, but not all.

From what I have seen, I think the risk to Mr M was too great for Santander to ignore and, I agree with the investigator, Santander would have been neglectful not to have acted in these circumstances. Although the reasons Mr M gave to Santander for the cash withdrawals changed, there was no suggestion to us from Santander that he was lying, just vulnerable to financial abuse.

Our service expects financial business to actively protect customers. This is especially the case when the business knows its customer has a history of victimisation and are vulnerable, sadly it is not uncommon for victims to be targeted repeatedly. Protecting customers may mean that a financial business declines to carry out a customer's payment or withdrawal instructions.

Santander has a duty of care to liaise with the police and minimise access to customer funds if there are concerns regarding an account holder's vulnerability to scams or fraud. I cannot tell Santander to pay compensation when I do not feel the bank have made an error. All banks must protect their customers from financial harm, and I'm satisfied Santander has done so.

The investigator has explained to Mr M that as we aren't the financial regulator, it is outside of our remit to ask a business to change its policies or procedures, such as the protections that they provide to customers. We can only ensure they've followed their own terms and conditions and internal guidelines – and I'm satisfied that Santander has on this occasion, and for good reasons.

In conclusion, having reviewed the information provided, I can see Santander took actions in line with its safeguarding policy when restricting Mr M's account and I have concluded that it treated Mr M fairly and reasonably.

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 M to accept or reject my decision before 17 November 2025.

Andrew Fraser
Ombudsman