

The complaint

Mr M complains that on two occasions when visiting branches of HSBC UK Bank Plc, he experienced poor customer service and discrimination due to his race.

What happened

Mr M had a restriction on his current account meaning he had to go to branches of HSBC to withdraw money. He visited two branches in the north of England and says he was treated with suspicion and made to feel like a criminal. On one occasion, he was waiting in branch for over an hour and twenty minutes and had to leave the branch before the transaction had been completed.

Mr M says on a third occasion the transaction was handled appropriately and swiftly. He says the difference is on the third occasion he was dealt with by a person of colour. He believes this shows a discriminatory bias on the part of the first two branches.

HSBC in its final response letters (FRLs) apologised to Mr M for the delays and problems he experienced. It said the service hadn't been to the standard it would expect and awarded £150 compensation for the incident where Mr M waited for over an hour and £50 for the other occasion. Mr M was unhappy with the compensation offered and referred his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service.

An investigator considered Mr M's complaint and felt the compensation awarded was sufficient. They said the Financial Ombudsman Service couldn't decide whether somebody had been discriminated against. But it could say if the customer had been treated reasonably or not. Mr M said he'd like an ombudsman to review his complaint. He asked that the wider patterns of behaviour and that the possibility of racial bias – conscious or unconscious – having taken place - were considered.

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.

Before I move on to explaining what decision I've reached and why, I'd like to comment on the aspect of discrimination. Mr M has alleged HSBC discriminated against him on the grounds of race. Which is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. If Mr M wants to pursue that discrimination and have a finding made about whether the Equality Act has been broken, he must do so in court. Because only a court can assess whether the law has been broken.

My role is to see whether Mr M has been treated fairly and reasonably and, if he hasn't, consider what must be done to put things right. So, what I'm considering is what happened in the two branches Mr M has complained about.

I accept this will come as a disappointment to Mr M but, whilst I do feel that HSBC treated Mr M poorly, I think its compensation is fair and so I won't be requiring it to do anything

more.

Mr M visited the first branch on 28 March 2025. From the notes I've seen, Mr M presented the required information to allow him to withdraw funds but still met with barriers. He alleges the member of staff spoke overly loudly and used a sarcastic tone. I can see that HSBC acknowledged the poor service and sent feedback to the member of staff about how such transactions should be handled in the future. It sent its FRL to this first complaint on 8 April 2025. Mr M says he wasn't told he could refer his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service. But I can see the FRL details the referral rights as it should.

I can understand and appreciate that being questioned at the counter about transactions would be embarrassing for Mr M. But, in view of the block on his account, the member of staff was following the correct procedure in gathering information. It may have been preferable to go to a private room – but that may also have made Mr M feel others could be questioning what was going on. I'm not sure there's a right or wrong answer here – but I do think Mr M should have been given the opportunity to discuss the transaction in private. I agree with HSBC that the service wasn't as good as it should have been, but I think the £50 awarded was sufficient.

In the second branch, Mr M was kept waiting for over an hour and twenty minutes and had to leave the branch without making the withdrawal. I agree with HSBC that this was unacceptable. The transaction should not have taken that long, and the fact Mr M wasn't advised as to what was going on can only have increased his distress. I'm pleased to see that HSBC has given feedback to all the members of staff involved and has compensated Mr M with £150. I think this is reasonable and is in line with what I'd have awarded if compensation hadn't already been paid.

In conclusion, Mr M says he feels HSBC has discriminated against him given the problems he experienced. I can understand why Mr M feels this way but having looked at all the evidence I don't think HSBC has done so. I hope that it helps Mr M to know that someone impartial and independent has looked into his concerns.

My final decision

My final decision is I do not uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr M to accept or reject my decision before 31 October 2025.

Stephen Farmer
Ombudsman