

The complaint

Mr G complained that when he was overseas and unable to use his mobile phone NATIONAL WESTMINSTER BANK PUBLIC LIMITED COMPANY ('NatWest') didn't delete his biometrics or de-link his phone number from its mobile banking app, preventing him from accessing his account via laptop.

He also complained that NatWest denied knowledge of an offer it had made previously to refund fees CHAPS* fees.

**Clearing House Automated Payment System – a 'CHAPS' fee is bank charge made for handling a same-day high-value transfer paid electronically.*

What happened

The brief complaint summary above outlines the key facts and as the background to this complaint is well-known to the parties I don't need to say more about this here.

When Mr G complained to NatWest, it didn't uphold his complaint about what happened when he was overseas and his phone wasn't working. It said customers needed to be registered for biometrics to send high-value payments via online banking. It also said that if Mr G didn't want to be registered for biometrics, he could use the CHAPS option in branch – but this would incur a fee.

Mr G was unhappy with this response – not least because as a goodwill gesture NatWest had previously said that he could apply for CHAPS fees to be refunded.

When he brought his complaint to us, our investigator said NatWest's process for high value transfers required customers to be registered with biometrics to make online banking safe and secure. And whilst NatWest had overlooked a previous offer to allow Mr G to effectively make fee free CHAPS payments, it had now corrected its position and provided an assurance that it would extend its goodwill offer and refund fees for all future CHAPS payments made in branch. Our investigator felt this was a fair and reasonable outcome and didn't think NatWest needed to do anything more.

Mr G disagreed with the investigator and didn't feel his complaints had been properly understood or addressed. So his complaint came to me for a decision.

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.

This includes listening to the call recordings provided. I've carried out an independent review and having done so, I've reached the same conclusion as our investigator.

It's part of my role to identify what I think are the key issues here – our rules allow me to do this. I may not address everything that's been mentioned by Mr G, but this just means

I haven't needed to specifically refer to everything in the same level of detail as Mr G order to reach a decision in this case.

From what Mr G has said, it seems to me that there are three distinct aspects to his complaint which, taken together, effectively encompass his main concerns. To uphold the complaint, I'd need to find NatWest acted unfairly and caused loss or detriment and hasn't done enough to put things right. So I've made this the focus of my decision.

Overseas payment issue

I'm sorry for how what happened left Mr G feeling. But it wasn't NatWest's fault if Mr G couldn't use his phone to access mobile banking and his other phone couldn't run NatWest's mobile banking app.

Mr G thought that if NatWest deleted his biometrics and de-linked the phone number attached to the app then he'd be able to access online banking without needing to use his phone and he could do the transfer that way. But as NatWest's process requires biometrics for high-value payments, he still couldn't have completed the transfer online without the app.

How financial businesses choose to operate and their internal processes comes under the oversight of the regulator - the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA). So it's not up to me to tell NatWest how it should use biometrics or that it shouldn't link biometrics to online banking.

Repeatedly adding/removing biometrics can also lock the system, requiring a branch visit which wouldn't have been an option for Mr G when he wasn't in the UK.

Taking all this into consideration, I can't fairly say that the reason Mr G wasn't able to satisfy NatWest's security to make the payment he wanted to send was due to NatWest being unfair or unreasonable.

Biometrics linked to online banking

I think this was best summed up by Mr G when speaking to NatWest:

'You force customers to use the app when they just want to log in on their laptop – and I would like you to remove that 'force' part of it. I'd like the option of either using my laptop when I want to and I'd like the option of being able to use the app with the biometric data when I want to. I don't see why the two things should be linked and it's causing a great deal of inconvenience to your customers such as me.'

NatWest must satisfy regulatory and legal requirements aimed at keeping customers' accounts secure and protecting them from fraud and scams and have processes in place to do this. Biometrics provides the highest level of security for customers and banks and it's now widely used to help protect customers and keep their money safe. So I can understand why this is a central part of NatWest's security and verification processes. And it's covered by the account terms and conditions which Mr G signed up to in order to be able to use the account.

As mentioned above, NatWest's business processes are outside our remit. And whilst I can understand why Mr G wants NatWest to offer the option of doing things his preferred way, this doesn't mean that NatWest is treating him unfairly or unreasonably. If Mr G has biometrics registered to use the app this enables him to make the high value payments he often does. But when his biometrics are on the system, this is how NatWest verifies him as part of his online login process. I am aware that Mr G understands that NatWest can remove his biometrics and 'scrub his phone' – but that means he can't use the app and he loses other benefits that come with having the app installed (which NatWest has explained to him).

I'm not unsympathetic to the position Mr G finds himself in. But if the way NatWest does things isn't working for Mr G he has the option of moving his account elsewhere – although I think it's fair to say that NatWest isn't unusual in the way it uses biometrics and many banks have similar processes.

Mr G always has the option of making his large transfers in branch. And this links to the third aspect of this complaint.

The CHAPS fee issue

Following a previous complaint, NatWest told Mr G :*'...you can visit your local branch to arrange larger transfers via a chaps. Once these have been completed, please contact me directly on the details below and we can arrange for the chaps fee to be re-credited as a goodwill gesture.'*

This was overlooked later on by NatWest when an agent he spoke to on the phone couldn't find any record of this arrangement and NatWest wrote to Mr G saying: *'...no agreement was made to waive future CHAPS payment charges.'*

Clearly NatWest made a mistake here – and NatWest has acknowledged that. But I can't see that this oversight has had any financial consequences for Mr G. The only large transfer that he made after this was completed via mobile banking so no CHAPS fee was incurred.

I hope that provides some clarity for Mr G – it isn't an agreement to 'waive' the CHAPS fee and Mr G should still expect to pay this when he makes a CHAPS transaction. But NatWest has provided its assurance that Mr G will be able to apply for a refund of any CHAPS fees incurred in future and provided a reference he should quote when he applies for a refund.

I'm sorry that Mr G found all this so frustrating. But for the reasons set out above, I haven't found that NatWest has treated him unfairly or unreasonably overall. He's got the reference to quote if he makes a CHAPS payment in branch and incurs a fee – and Mr G can expect this to be promptly refunded. But just to be clear – if Mr G should ever have reason to complain about this arrangement or he finds there's a problem getting a CHAPS fee refunded, he should raise this as a new complaint with NatWest so it has a chance to put things right. And, if he's still unhappy with its final answer, he can bring the complaint to us as a new referral.

My final decision

For the reasons I have set out above, my final decision is that I do not uphold this complaint as I am satisfied that NatWest has already done enough to put things right.

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

Susan Webb
Ombudsman