

The complaint

Mr D has complained that National Westminster Bank Public Limited Company (NatWest) treated him unfairly when he started to gamble using his NatWest current account.

What happened

On 17 December 2024, Mr D began to use his NatWest current account to make gambling transactions. He's said that the behaviour on the account demonstrated a significant departure from how the account had been managed before. So given the volume and high value of the transactions he felt NatWest should have stepped in to support him.

He's explained that he had previously self-excluded from certain betting providers but that in April 2024 he used Gamstop to help him manage things further. He's said he wasn't aware that NatWest offered gambling controls at the time.

On 16 January 2025, Mr D complained to NatWest about its lack of intervention and for failing to identify him as a potentially vulnerable customer.

NatWest looked into Mr D's complaint and issued a final response letter on 20 January 2025 explaining it didn't believe it had acted unfairly. It said that Mr D had been using his money to gamble and that as this wasn't an illegal way to spend money, it couldn't actively prevent him from making these transactions without his authority. It explained it offered a gambling block and gave instructions on how to access this (which Mr D did) and it gave the details of other organisations that might be able to help Mr D.

Mr D didn't accept NatWest's response, so he referred his complaint to our service. One of our investigators looked into it, and based on the evidence available, our investigator said she didn't think NatWest had acted unfairly in this case.

Mr D didn't accept what our investigator said and asked for a final decision on the case. As no agreement could be reached, the complaint has been passed to me to decide.

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 would like to assure both parties that I've thought carefully about all the information provided. If I don't comment on a particular point, it doesn't mean that I haven't considered it. Rather my decision focuses on what I consider to be the key issues of the complaint and reflects the informal nature of our service.

I'd firstly like to say how sorry I am to hear of Mr D's difficulties and I've no doubt what a challenging time this was.

Although I don't doubt that Mr D was vulnerable at the time, I'm not persuaded NatWest acted unfairly in this case and I'll explain why.

There was a change in how Mr D used his account between 17 December 2024 when he began to gamble and 16 January 2025 when he complained to NatWest. But I'm not satisfied there was enough in this short time to have indicated to NatWest that they needed to do more in this case.

It's important to note that generally a bank won't manually monitor a current account unless there is a clear reason to do this, such as signs of financial difficulty. Banks do have systems in place to pick up on specific issues such as fraud, but these systems aren't generally designed to otherwise monitor what a customer may be spending their money on.

Whilst its accepted gambling can be problematic for some customers, it isn't illegal and is a legitimate past-time. So, to block this type of transaction on a current account, a bank would generally need a customer's instructions to do this, rather than it being something it would do unilaterally. I can't see that Mr D had reached out to NatWest to inform it of his addiction or to ask for help previously. So, I can't reasonably say it should have been on notice that Mr D needed support in this area. I'm pleased to see that once NatWest was aware of the problem, it directed Mr D to the controls it did offer and signposted him to other support that was available.

I've carefully reviewed Mr D's statements and I can see he was regularly gambling from 17 December 2024. However, until 16 January 2025, the account had a healthy credit balance, had no returned direct debits and was well funded meaning there were no clear signs of financial difficulty for NatWest to reasonably pick up on.

I can see the account was funded in part through credit obtained elsewhere, but the majority of this lending was with other providers, which again isn't something that would be monitored. So, I don't think the wider account activity would reasonably have indicated to NatWest that Mr D was struggling financially or prompted a review of the account.

Mr D did successfully apply to NatWest for a loan of £5,000 in early January 2025 but this was cancelled within the 14-day cooling off period and the funds returned. I've considered whether this should have put NatWest on notice that Mr D was excessively gambling. But I don't think a loan of this amount for someone with Mr D's income, would have triggered a detailed review of Mr D's spending on his current account. NatWest has also said given the nature of the transactions on the current account; they weren't picked up by a check for gambling transactions when it made its lending decision.

I found that some transactions that Mr D had complained about, had been flagged by NatWest's fraud prevention systems. The transactions were internally reviewed and when it was established they weren't fraudulent, they were allowed to go through. This is what I'd reasonably expect NatWest to do in the situation. And whilst some transactions were flagged, given they were found to be legitimate and this isn't disputed, I don't think it reasonably meant NatWest needed to automatically carry out a manual review of Mr D's account.

Mr D used nearly £2,000 of an unarranged overdraft on his account on 16 January 2025. Had this not been cleared relatively quickly and had Mr D not complained on the same day, I may have expected this to trigger some sort of review of the account. However, as Mr D notified NatWest of his issues on this date, I don't think any lack of contact at this point has made a material difference.

I don't doubt how strongly Mr D feels about his complaint and I'm sorry to hear of how this situation has impacted him. I'm sorry to disappoint Mr D, but on the available evidence, I'm not persuaded that NatWest has acted unfairly here for the reasons I've set out.

My final decision

My final decision is that I don't uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr D to accept or reject my decision before 19 March 2026.

Charlotte Roberts
Ombudsman