

The complaint

Mr M complains that Nationwide Building Society blocked his account and on-line banking, then involved the police when he visited his branch to have the block removed.

What happened

Mr M has been the victim of previous scams. During January, Nationwide had concerns over payments requested by Mr M and, in order to protect his account and himself, his account and on-line banking were blocked pending investigations.

Mr M was unaccepting of Nationwide's attempts to gather further information about the transactions to prevent him being the victim of further scams. Mr M acknowledged that he was a trusting individual and that some of the money he'd sent to individuals previously, hadn't been repaid. But he didn't agree that Nationwide had the right to stop him from spending his money in any way he wanted.

When Mr M went to branch to resolve the issue, the police were there as well as the branch manager. Mr M says he was made to feel like a criminal and in his complaint said he wanted his account and on-line banking unblocked, an apology for the way he'd been treated and £1,000 compensation.

Nationwide didn't uphold Mr M's complaint. It said its actions were justified and it had invoked the Banking Protocol (which includes requesting police presence) correctly. Mr M disagreed with Nationwide's final answer and referred his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service where an investigator considered Mr M's concerns.

In their written opinion, the investigator agreed Nationwide was justified in having concerns and so did nothing wrong in blocking Mr M's on-line banking and account. They also said the Banking Protocol allowed the police involvement if it was deemed appropriate. So, the investigator also didn't uphold the complaint.

Mr M asked for an ombudsman's decision saying that the investigator had taken Nationwide's side completely and that it was entirely unreasonable for the police to have been involved. So, the complaint has been passed to me for a final 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.

Having read the information on file and listened to Mr M's phone call on 17 February 2026, I understand the depth of feeling he has about this matter. My role in this complaint is not to champion either Mr M's or Nationwide's case, but to reach an impartial decision based on the evidence. Although I realise this will come as a great disappointment to Mr M, I don't believe Nationwide has acted incorrectly and so won't be asking it to do anything further.

Because Mr M had been the victim of previous scams and he acknowledges himself that he

is a trusting individual who's sometimes taken advantage of, Nationwide decided that further investigation and action was necessary when it became aware of unusual transactions.

Nationwide initially blocked Mr M's account and restricted access to his on-line banking until it had spoken to him so it could satisfy itself the transactions were genuine and not in any way fraudulent or linked to a scam. When Mr M was asked to attend a branch, there were police officers present who spoke with Mr M, in the presence of the branch manager.

Mr M feels this was a gross over-reaction to the situation which left him feeling like a criminal. I can understand why Mr M would be concerned at the police's involvement. But because it caused Mr M distress, I can't say their involvement was wrong. I must decide whether Nationwide's response was reasonable having regard to the law, best practice and industry rules and regulations.

The starting point here is that a bank or building society's principal obligation to its customers is to make payments it's been requested to make. If it doesn't do so, then there must be good reason for the payment to be refused or delayed. Nationwide felt it had reasonable grounds, based on the history of the account, to delay Mr M's payments until it had satisfied itself as to the authenticity of the transactions. In this case, because of Mr M's response to the investigation Nationwide carried out, the Banking Protocol was invoked.

I'm sorry that the consequences of Nationwide's referral to the police caused Mr M distress and made him feel his reputation was being impugned. But, considering all the evidence, I believe Nationwide were within their rights to act as it did.

Financial institutions including Nationwide, and police forces, have joined together to fight back against potential fraud through a ground-breaking rapid response scheme called the Banking Protocol. This industry-wide initiative was developed by UK Finance in partnership with National Trading Standards. Nationwide's requirement was to train its branch staff to spot any potential warning signs that someone may be about to fall victim to a scam and try to prevent this, among other things. After this, the staff can request a police response to the branch or customer address to carry out further investigations.

This approach demonstrates how seriously Nationwide and the finance industry is taking its responsibility to protect customers from fraud, while working closely with partners in law enforcement. The banking protocol is in place because financial institutions have a duty to protect customers and their money to keep them safe from scams, fraud, and financial crime. The measures they employ can feel intrusive, but they are there to safeguard customers and their money.

Whilst I'm aware that Mr M is likely to be unhappy with the decision I've reached, taking everything into account, I can't find Nationwide has made any errors here and I believe they've acted fairly and reasonably in their actions.

My final decision

For the reasons given above, my final decision is that 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 15 May 2026.

Stephen Farmer
Ombudsman