

complaint

This complaint is about a credit card payment protection insurance (PPI) policy taken in 2002. Mr R says The Royal Bank of Scotland Plc (“RBS”) mis-sold him the PPI.

background

The background and circumstances leading up to this complaint, which includes Mr R’s circumstances at the time of the sale as well as the PPI policy benefits, limitations and exclusions of cover, aren’t disputed. So I haven’t repeated all of this information here.

Our adjudicator did not uphold the mis-sale complaint. But my colleague thought RBS’s offer to pay back some of the cost of the PPI because of the non-disclosure of high commission and profit share Mr R paid, was fair in the circumstances.

Mr R’s representative disagreed with the adjudicator’s opinion – it didn’t raise any new or additional points but repeated the same complaint points and arguments it had previously made.

As the complaint couldn’t be resolved informally, it has been passed to me for a decision.

my findings

Although I have only included a summary of the complaint, I have read and considered all the evidence and arguments available to me from the outset, in order to decide what is, in my opinion, fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of this complaint.

When considering what is fair and reasonable, I am required to take into account relevant: law and regulations; regulators’ rules, guidance and standards; codes of practice; and, where appropriate, what I consider to have been good industry practice at the time.

We’ve set out our general approach to PPI mis-sale complaints on our website and published some example final decisions that set out in detail how these relevant considerations may apply to PPI sales like Mr R’s. I haven’t set out that detailed information here but I’ve taken into account all relevant considerations in deciding Mr R’s complaint.

Having done so, I’ve decided not to uphold the mis-sale complaint. I’ve also considered the issue of non-disclosure of commission. And I’ve decided RBS should have disclosed the commission it received - but that RBS’s offer to refund some of the cost of the PPI to compensate for the unfairness caused is fair in the circumstances. I’ve summarised my reasons for each of these conclusions below.

In summary, my reasons for not upholding the mis-sale part of this complaint are:

- Mr R has said PPI was just included with his card. But his postal application form for the card had a separate “*Card Payment Protection*” section for the PPI, with a box for him to tick if he wanted the cover. On Mr R’s form, which he signed to take the card, the box for PPI was ticked – and I think he would’ve known that if he didn’t want the cover the box for it shouldn’t be ticked. Also, nothing on the form said the PPI had to be taken. Overall, I think RBS made it clear Mr R didn’t have to take the PPI and he chose to take it.

- RBS didn't recommend the PPI to Mr R, so it didn't have to check the PPI was right or suitable for him. But it did have to give Mr R enough clear and timely information so he could decide for himself if it was right for him.
- It's possible the information RBS gave Mr R about the PPI wasn't as clear as it should've been. But he chose to take it - so it looks like he wanted this type of cover – and it wasn't fundamentally wrong for him or too dissimilar to what he reasonably thought he was buying from the information he was given. The application form said PPI was cover for the card payments in case of accident, sickness or unemployment – and if he couldn't work Mr R had no savings to pay his card and, from what he's told us, only had statutory sick pay. It also looks like the PPI was affordable, taking everything into account.

Mr R couldn't have claimed if he missed work due to the medical condition he's told us he'd started receiving treatment for in the year before the sale – so he couldn't claim for everything he might've expected. But taking into account everything I have, including that Mr R hasn't told us of ever having missed work with this health issue before the sale and didn't mention it when he first told us about his health, what I have doesn't persuade me this would've been at the forefront of Mr R's mind when he was deciding on the cover. On balance, with all this in mind, I don't think better information about the exclusion for existing health issues would've changed Mr R's decision to take the policy. There were also no additional restrictions on cover for mental health problems.

So I think the PPI could've still been useful for Mr R if something went wrong. With all this in mind, I don't think he would've declined the cover had RBS done anything more.

- While the policy contained limitations or exclusions on claims relating to back conditions, in light of Mr R's circumstances at the time of sale and despite its limitations and exclusions, the policy wasn't fundamentally wrong or unsuitable for him. So I think he would've still thought he had some good reasons to take it.

Overall, I consider Mr R would've still taken the PPI. It was sufficiently close to what it's likely he thought he was getting and, given his circumstances at the sale, it could've provided a useful benefit at a difficult time if Mr R couldn't work. And, in those circumstances, I think he would've taken the policy in any event.

Mr R's representative has raised a number of what I consider to be general complaint points, which it says apply to all PPI complaints. These general points include: a claim that the Financial Ombudsman Service is not correctly applying the regulator's rules and guidance for handling PPI complaints; these policies represented poor value because of the number of significant exclusions and limitations of cover coupled with the low claims ratio; and the duty of utmost good faith meant RBS should have disclosed the poor value and explained the significance of the limitations and exclusions and the impact it had on the chances of making a claim.

Mr R's representative has not said how these points apply to the specific facts and circumstances of Mr R's individual complaint – just that they apply to all PPI complaints.

I have thought about these things and how they might apply in Mr R's particular case. But these points don't persuade me to alter my conclusions about what is fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the complaint – for the reasons I've set out above, I don't uphold the mis-sale element of this complaint.

This means RBS doesn't have to pay back all of the cost of the PPI to Mr R.

non-disclosure of commission

As I said above, I've also considered the issue of non-disclosure of commission, including whether the non-disclosure resulted in an unfair relationship under section 140A of the Consumer Credit Act – and if so, what fair compensation would be to remedy that unfairness.

Having done so, I've decided RBS should have disclosed the commission it received and that RBS's offer to refund some of the cost of PPI to compensate for the unfairness caused is fair. My reasons are set out below.

was there an unfair relationship?

RBS didn't tell Mr R about the high levels of commission and profit share paid in this case. So, taking into account:

- The Supreme Court judgment in *Plevin*¹ and the conclusion in that case that the non-disclosure of commission could lead to an unfair relationship;
- The FCA's rules and guidance for handling complaints about the non-disclosure of commission and profit share - introduced in light of the Supreme Court judgment in *Plevin* - which requires a business to presume that the failure to disclose commission gave rise to an unfair relationship where the business expected commission and profit share to be more than 50% of the cost of the policy; and
- the likelihood, in my view, that a court would determine that the relationship between RBS and Mr R was unfair under section 140A of the Consumer Credit Act because RBS didn't tell him about the high levels of commission and profit share in this case

I don't think RBS acted fairly and reasonably in its dealings with Mr R because it failed to disclose the high commission and profit share.

redress to remedy that unfair relationship

I'm now required to consider what is fair compensation in all the circumstances to remedy the unfairness I have identified.

Mr R's representatives have made a number of representations about this part of the complaint including the impact of the *Plevin* judgment and sections 140A and 140B of the Consumer Credit Act on his complaint.

In summary they've said Mr R should get back all the money he paid for the policy because: RBS failed to tell Mr R about the high commission and profit-share rates paid, the low claims ratio and the restrictions and exclusions on cover. Because they say that meant the policy was poor value, they say I should find Mr R wouldn't have taken the policy had he known about the level of commission and he should receive a refund of all the premiums he paid.

¹ *Plevin v Paragon Personal Finance Limited* [2014] UKSC 61 in which the Supreme Court concluded that the non-disclosure of commission could lead to an unfair relationship

But I don't agree. I'm mindful of the following:

- The Supreme Court judgment in *Plevin* made no specific finding about whether the consumer in that case would or would not have bought the PPI policy had the commission been disclosed;
- A court would have a range of powers available under section 140 B to remedy the unfairness caused by the non-disclosure of commission – it does not follow that a court would automatically order a return of all the premiums paid or conclude that a consumer would not have purchased the policy had the commission been disclosed; and
- The FCA considered the matter and decided that it wouldn't be appropriate to merge the considerations about undisclosed commission in the existing rules and guidance about mis-selling (hence the two-step approach for firms handling PPI complaints) and that the impact of any undisclosed commission and any remedy caused by it should be considered at step 2.

Taking into account relevant law and the FCA's rules and guidance, my role as an ombudsman is to determine what redress, if any, would represent fair compensation for Mr R in order to remedy the unfairness caused by RBS not disclosing the high level of commission to him before he purchased the policy.

So, taking into account:

- The FCA's guidance usually requires a business to refund the amounts paid by the consumer in commission and profit share *above* 50% of the policy's cost, plus interest in order to remedy the unfairness caused by the failure to disclose the level of commission;
- refunding some of the money paid for the PPI policy in this way is an order which, in my view a court could, in the exercise of its discretion, make under section 140B of the Consumer Credit Act in order to remedy any unfairness; and
- I am not, as Mr R's representative suggests, driven to conclude that he wouldn't have purchased the policy but for RBS's failure to disclose the level of commission for the reasons I've given above.

I think it was fair for RBS to calculate compensation in line with the FCA's guidance and return *some* of the money Mr R paid for his PPI policy.

I consider this fairly removes the source of the unfairness. This is because it leaves Mr R with the policy I've concluded above he would still have taken if RBS had done everything it should have done – but with lower commission and profit share levels.

So I consider that RBS's payment of an amount equivalent to the commission and profit share paid in excess of 50% of the policy costs (plus associated interest where applicable) in line with the FCA's guidance to firms is fair in all the circumstances.

As RBS has already paid Mr R compensation on this basis, I don't consider it should do anything further.

my final decision

Overall, having considered all the evidence and arguments to decide what is, in my opinion, fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of this complaint and for the reasons I have set out above, I don't uphold the mis-sale element of Mr R's complaint or make any award in favour of him for this part of the complaint.

But because of the non-disclosure of commission and profit share, I've decided that The Royal Bank of Scotland Plc should pay Mr R an amount equivalent to the commission and profit share paid in excess of 50% of the policy cost (plus associated interest where applicable). As The Royal Bank of Scotland Plc has already paid compensation on this basis, I do not consider that The Royal Bank of Scotland Plc should do anything more.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr R to accept or reject my decision before 26 September 2021.

Richard Sheridan
ombudsman