

complaint

Mr B and Mrs G complain that National Westminster Bank Plc blocked access to their account when they tried to make a transfer online.

background

Mr B and Mrs G were planning to move abroad. They say they visited a branch of NatWest to arrange to transfer money and were told that the best way would be for them to make a faster payment online. But when they tried this following their move, they received a message asking them to contact NatWest. Meanwhile, access to their account was blocked.

When they contacted NatWest, it told them that someone from its fraud team would contact them. But when they hadn't received a call after two more days, they complained. Once NatWest had completed its investigation, it lifted the block. It paid Mr B and Mrs G £10 to cover the cost of their phone calls. And it offered to reimburse any further phone costs if they provided a copy of their phone bill. But Mr B and Mrs G remained unhappy that no-one from NatWest's fraud team had called them. And they wanted an explanation of why access to their account had been blocked.

Following our involvement, NatWest offered to pay Mr B and Mrs G a further £50 to apologise for the fact that the fraud department didn't call them as promised. Our adjudicator didn't think NatWest had made a mistake when it blocked access to Mr B and Mrs G's account. So he didn't recommend that it should do anything further.

Mr B and Mrs G aren't happy with the adjudicator's view. They say that their frustration with NatWest stems from its actions before and after the block, not from the fact that it blocked the account. They consider its service to have been poor. They say, in summary, that they did their best to make sure there wouldn't be any problem transferring the money. And they relied on NatWest's assurance that a faster payment online would be the best way of sending the money. The fact that the transfer failed left them in a vulnerable position. And they're dissatisfied that NatWest hasn't apologised or taken any responsibility for misinforming them about the best method of making the transfer.

Mr B and Mrs G are also dissatisfied that when they contacted NatWest, it refused to discuss the situation with them. They say it didn't tell them when they could expect to be contacted by the fraud department or give them any information about what would happen next. This was even though they'd told it what a vulnerable situation they were in. What's more, the fraud department failed to call them. They believe that NatWest took a casual attitude to the fact that they had no access to money. And they consider that they should have been considered as a priority, given their circumstances.

my findings

I've considered all the available evidence and arguments to decide what's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this complaint. Having done so, I've reached the same conclusion as the adjudicator, for similar reasons.

As Mr B and Mrs G are aware, the bank's fraud detection system doesn't only pick up transactions that actually turn out to be fraudulent, but also transactions which it suspects may be fraudulent. This is designed to protect the bank and its customers from fraudulent activity. There will inevitably be situations in which a transaction that has been picked up by

the system is genuine. NatWest has explained that its systems monitor accounts for fraud trends. The account was blocked because the attempted transaction was in line with fraud trends at the time.

I have no reason to doubt what Mr B and Mrs G say about having been told that a faster payment online would be the best way of transferring their money abroad. But I don't think the adviser they spoke to could reasonably have been expected to foresee that NatWest's fraud detection systems would flag that particular transaction and block access to their account.

NatWest has explained that it is usually able to lift a block on an account once the account holder has confirmed that a transaction is genuine. But in this case, further investigation was required. So it wasn't able to lift the block as quickly as it would otherwise have been able to. But I'm satisfied that NatWest resolved the situation and lifted the block as quickly as it could in the circumstances.

I acknowledge that Mr B and Mrs G consider that NatWest was dismissive of their situation. But due to the sensitive nature of the investigation, the amount of information it could provide to them at the time was necessarily limited. NatWest accepts that Mr B and Mrs G didn't receive a phone call from the fraud department, as they'd been told they would. And I can understand that not knowing what was happening will have added to an already stressful situation. NatWest's apologised that its fraud department didn't call Mr B and Mrs G. And it's offered to pay them £50 to reflect the trouble and upset caused.

I can appreciate how difficult it must have been for them to be abroad without access to their money. But I don't consider that this was due to any mistake on NatWest's part. In the circumstances, I consider its offer to pay Mr B and Mrs G £50 to be fair.

my final decision

My decision is that National Westminster Bank Plc should pay Mr B and Mrs G £50 as it has offered to do.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr B and Mrs G to accept or reject my decision before 13 November 2015.

Juliet Collins
ombudsman