

## **The complaint**

Mrs H is unhappy that Union Reiseversicherung AG declined a claim made on her travel insurance policy.

## **What happened**

In or around January 2020, Mrs H took out a single trip 'Backpacker & Longstay' travel insurance policy, underwritten by URV ('the policy'). The policy covered the period 12 February to 12 May 2020. Around the same time, Mrs H booked return flights to a country I'll refer to 'A', departing the UK on 19 February 2020. She was due to return to the UK a couple of months later.

Whilst abroad, Mrs H received notification that her return flight had been changed and she'd been booked on a flight from A to the UK a couple of days later than scheduled. The rearranged flight was subsequently cancelled by the airline as were a number of return flights which Mrs H subsequently rebooked through the same airline.

When a return flight dated mid-June 2020 was cancelled towards the end of May 2020, Mrs H booked a return flight with a different airline for 7 June 2020, which she says cost her over £1,750. Mrs H subsequently made a claim on the policy for cost of the return flight – which URV declined. It said that the circumstances which led to the claim weren't covered under the policy.

Unhappy, Mrs H complained to URV. It maintained its position. So, Mrs H referred her complaint to our service. Our investigator said URV hadn't fairly considered Mrs H's claim under the trip disruption section of the policy. In her view the Covid-19 pandemic was a major incident as defined by the trip disruption section of the policy, as it amounted to an act of nature. Our investigator recommended URV review the claim under the trip disruption section of the policy in light of the remaining policy terms and conditions.

URV disagreed. So, Mrs H's complaint was passed to me to consider everything afresh to decide. I issued my provisional decision in May 2022 explaining in more detail why I was also intending to uphold Mrs H's complaint. I invited both parties to provide any further comments or information. They've both confirmed they have nothing further to add.

## **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.

URV has an obligation to handle insurance claims fairly and promptly. And it mustn't unreasonably decline an insurance claim.

### **Curtailment claim**

Pages 32 and 33 of the policy terms and conditions (entitled: 'if you had to cut your trip short') set out the section on curtailment. It says it will provide cover for certain costs if:

*You had to cut short your trip because the following unexpectedly happened after you left home:*

- you, a travelling companion, a family member, a business colleague, or the person you were going to stay with became ill, was injured or died;*
- your home was burgled, or seriously damaged by fire, storm or flood;*
- you, or a travel companion were quarantined, or called for jury service or required as a witness in a court of law;*
- you, or a travel companion were made redundant;*
- you, or a travel companion, have leave withdrawn and is a member of the armed forces (including reserves and territorial), emergency services, medical or nursing professions (in the public sector) or senior employees of the government;*
- the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise against all but essential travel within a 30 mile radius of your trip destination.*

Natural disaster is defined as:

volcanic eruption, flood, tsunami, earthquake, landslide, hurricane, tornado or wildfire

Mrs H ended up returning to the UK after she'd originally intended. So, I don't think the trip was cut short. As such, I don't think URV has unfairly and unreasonably concluded that there wasn't cover for Mrs H's claim under this section of the policy.

Trip disruption claim

Pages 22 and 23 of the policy terms and conditions (entitled: 'if a major incident happens when you are away') set out the section on trip disruption. It says:

*If your trip was disrupted due to a major incident.*

*This is what we will do:*

*We will pay you up to:*

- £1,000 for reasonable additional travel expenses to enable you to return home, or move to a safer area.*
- £100 for each 24-hour period for up to a maximum of £700 for additional accommodation.*
- £30 for each 24-hour period for food up to a maximum of £210.*
- £150 for the emergency replenishment of baby essentials or prescription medication, if your existing supplies run out during the period that you are delayed.*

It also confirms that the deductible amount is £150 per person, per incident.

Trip in this section is defined as: "travel during the period of insurance".

Mrs H bought the policy around January 2020. She booked the trip around the same time. And the trip began on or around 19 February 2020. So, I'm satisfied that Mrs H travelled on the outbound flight from the UK during the period of insurance.

URV has said that the Mrs H's trip wasn't disrupted; merely extended.

The section provides cover if Mrs H's trip was disrupted due to a major incident. "Disrupted" isn't defined by the policy. However, I'm satisfied that the reason why her flights back to the UK were cancelled by the airline on a number of occasions was due to the global impact of Covid-19. And as this was out of Mrs H's control – and as I've seen nothing to indicate that

she wanted to extend her trip - I'm satisfied that Mrs H having her trip extended amounted to her trip being disrupted. Afterall, it meant that she was unable to travel back to the UK on the date she had intended. There were also restrictions in place in A at the time, restricting everyone's ability to freely move around and partake in certain activities.

Although Mrs H ended up returning to the UK after the period of insurance ended – as set out in the insurance schedule – I think it's fair and reasonable in this case to conclude that this was for reasons wholly outside of her control and that the trip disruption section of the policy is applicable to the claim she made. The reason she couldn't return is due to the unprecedented impact of Covid-19 on global travel and I'm satisfied that it's fair and reasonable to consider that she's covered by the policy in the circumstances of this case. I'm also satisfied that she was making reasonable attempts to return to the UK.

So, the key issue for me to determine is whether the underlying reason for Mrs H's trip being disrupted - the Covid-19 pandemic - can fairly and reasonably be said to amount to a major incident.

Under the trip disruption section of the policy, 'major incident' is defined as:

*war, invasion, acts of foreign enemy, hostilities or warlike operation (whether war be declared or not), civil war, mutiny, military rising, insurrection, rebellion, revolution, military or usurped power, climatic conditions, volcanic eruption and other acts of nature which first arise during your trip*

The phrase "other acts of nature" isn't defined under the policy. And in the absence of the phrase being defined, I've carefully considered whether URV has fairly and reasonably concluded that this phrase doesn't include a virus pandemic.

For the reasons I've set out below, I don't think it has.

#### *The dictionary definition*

I've looked at the definition of 'nature' in the Cambridge English Dictionary. Although not definitive, I think it's relevant that 'nature' is defined as "all the animals, plants, rocks, etc. in the world and all the features, forces, and processes that happen or exist independently of people, such as the weather, the sea, mountains, the production of young animals or plants, and growth".

So, the dictionary definition doesn't expressly include a microscopic virus. However, I think the definition – taken as a whole – is wide enough to include it. I'm satisfied that a virus is organic material that invades living cells and uses its chemical machinery to exist and to replicate itself. As such, a virus could be viewed as part of the natural world. And given that the policy doesn't define 'nature' or 'other acts of nature', I don't think the policy contradicts the dictionary definition of 'nature'.

#### *The legal position*

Investors Compensation Scheme Limited v West Bromwich Building Society and Others is relevant caselaw which sets out several principles for the construction of contracts ('the principles'). They include:

- Interpretation is the ascertainment of the meaning which the document would convey to a reasonable person having all the background knowledge which would reasonably have been available to the parties in the situation in which they were at the time of the contract.

- That background knowledge is subject to the requirement that it should have been reasonably available to the parties and that it is not part of previous negotiations between the parties. It includes anything which would have affected the way in which the language of the document would have been understood by a reasonable person.
- The meaning which a document (or any other utterance) would convey to a reasonable person is not the same thing as the meaning of its words. The meaning of words is a matter of dictionaries and grammars; the meaning of the document is what the parties using those words against the relevant background would reasonably have been understood to mean.
- The “rule” that words should be given their “natural and ordinary meaning” reflects the common sense proposition that we do not easily accept that people have made linguistic mistakes, particularly in formal documents. On the other hand, if one would nevertheless conclude from the background that something must have gone wrong with the language, the law does not require judges to attribute to the parties an intention which they plainly could not have had.

The policy was taken out in around January 2020. Applying the principles to the policy, it's possible that the parties did have the global spread of a microscopic virus in mind when entering into the contract of insurance. After all, Covid-19 had started spreading amongst the human population at the time of entering into the insurance contract.

I also think a reasonable person with all knowledge of the background at the time of entering the contract could reasonably conclude that ‘other acts of nature’ would encompass all aspects of the natural world – including viruses. And different types of coronaviruses have emerged over the years and have affected certain countries along with other viruses such as the Zika virus and Ebola. I think this is something the parties would’ve been aware of at the time of entering into the contract of insurance.

Although, not legal authority arising out of the courts of England and Wales, the US District Court in the Southern District of New York in *JN Contemporary Art LLC v Phillips Auctioneers LCC* (No. 20-CV-4370) held that “[i]t cannot seriously be disputed that the Covid-19 pandemic is a natural disaster” for the purposes of a force majeure clause in an auction agreement which expressly referred to “natural disasters”. I don’t think that’s inconsistent with the spread of a microscopic virus falling within the definition of an “act of nature”.

I’ve also taken into account the ‘rules of language’ applied by the courts which say that a ‘sweeping up’ phrase will be of the same type as the previous specific provisions set out in the clause. Applying the rules of language to the policy definition of ‘major incident’ could lead to the conclusion that the sweeping up phrase of “any other acts of nature” at the end of the definition includes only acts of nature along the lines of volcanic eruption and climactic conditions, not microscopic viruses (such as Covid-19). However, the curtailment section of the policy, separately defines natural disaster. And when defining ‘major disruption’ in the trip disruption section of the policy, URV could’ve included the term ‘other natural disasters’ but didn’t. The phrase ‘other acts of nature’ was used. If it had instead referred to natural disasters when defining ‘major disruption’, then this may have been clearer for the policyholder to understand. So, in this case, I’m not persuaded that it would be fair and reasonable to equate ‘other acts of nature’ with the term ‘natural disaster’ – as defined by the policy.

Having considered everything above, I think the phrase “other acts of nature” has – at the very least - more than one meaning (in the absence of being separately defined elsewhere in the policy). And because I’m satisfied that the policy terms and conditions amount to a consumer contract, I think The Consumer Rights Act 2015 (the CRA) is a relevant consideration here. Section 69(1) of the CRA says: *“If a term in a consumer contract, or a*

*consumer notice, could have different meanings, the meaning that is most favourable to the consumer is to prevail.”*

I'm satisfied the meaning most favourable to Mrs H would be that the phrase “other acts of nature” includes microscopic viruses such as Covid-19.

#### *Other relevant considerations*

When deciding whether URV has acted fairly and reasonably by declining Mrs H's complaint, I've not only considered relevant law. Rule 3.6.4R of the Dispute Resolution Rules set out in the Financial Conduct Authority's Handbook says, when considering what's fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case, I should take into account: the 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.

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) Handbook sets out a number of Principles for Businesses, which URV must follow, including that a firm must:

- conduct its business with due skill, care and diligence (Principle 2).
- pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly (Principle 6).
- pay due regard to the information needs of its clients and communicate information to them in a way which is clear, fair and not misleading (Principle 7).

The Regulatory Guide, published by the FCA, entitled: 'The Responsibilities of Providers and Distributors for the Fair Treatment of Customers' (RPPD) includes the Regulator's guidance on what the combination of Principles and the detailed rules require providers of financial services in certain circumstances to do to ensure that customers are treated fairly. And this Guide explains that firms should take account of what information the customer needs to understand the product or service, its purpose and the risks, and communicate information in a way that is clear, fair and not misleading.

I also think it's good industry practice for underwriters of travel insurance policies to clearly set out the terms on which someone is insured, including what they are and aren't covered for. And they ought to provide clear definitions of any words or phrases which could be ambiguous and have various different meanings. I've explained above why I consider the phrase 'other acts of nature' to be ambiguous and, without the phrase being separately defined, that it has different interpretations.

Overall, I'm satisfied that this all leads to the conclusion that URV hasn't acted fairly and reasonably by declining Mrs H's claim here. I'm satisfied it's fair and reasonable for the phrase 'other acts of nature' to include the Covid-19 pandemic.

When deciding this issue, I've taken into account what URV has said about an act of nature being an event where the effects of which could not be prevented or avoided by the exercise of due care or foresight. But I'm not convinced by that. The other examples given of what constitutes a major disruption under the policy are potentially capable of being avoided.

So, as the phrase being hasn't been separately defined, I don't think a reasonable person considering 'other acts of nature' would reasonably conclude that the policy only covers a major disruption which couldn't have been avoided or prevented in some way. And I've not been referred to any independent evidence – medical or otherwise – which supports the idea that once transmission starts, a virus can be prevented from spreading across the world.

#### *The policy exclusions*

The trip disruption section of the policy also goes on to list what isn't covered and that includes if: "*you booked your trip, or travelled after the announcement of a major incident*". I'll refer to this as 'the exclusion'.

Under the policy, 'travelled' isn't separately defined but I'm currently satisfied that it would be fair and reasonable to interpret this as the date of travel from the UK.

The travel disruption section of the policy expressly provides cover for: "reasonable additional travel expenses to enable you to return home or move to a safer area". So, if 'travelled' in the context of the exclusion is interpreted more widely to include all travel – including travel back to the UK after the announcement of a major incident - then a policyholder is unlikely to ever be able to claim on the policy for a return flight home after a major incident is announced. Even though there is separate cover for such a scenario under the policy.

I'm also satisfied that the announcement of Covid-19 being a major incident first took place on 11 March 2020. Although, there were reports of people contracting Covid-19 before Mrs H travelled in February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) didn't declare Covid-19 as a pandemic until 11 March 2020. So, I don't think the exclusion is applicable to the circumstances of this complaint, as Mrs H didn't book her trip or travel on or after the WHO announcement.

### **Putting things right**

I direct URV to assess Mrs H's claim on the basis that a 'major incident' includes the Covid-19 pandemic and is covered under the trip disruption section of the policy. This is subject to the remaining terms and conditions of the policy – including (but not limited to) the financial limits of this section of the policy, and any applicable excess.

### **My final decision**

I uphold Mrs H's complaint. I direct Union Reiseversicherung AG to put things right as I've set out above.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mrs H to accept or reject my decision before 11 July 2022.

David Curtis-Johnson  
**Ombudsman**