

The complaint

Miss K complains that National Savings and Investments (NS&I) won't allow her to access her premium bonds.

What happened

Miss K says that she opened premium bonds with NS&I over 15 years ago and she has never heard anything about these. She says NS&I won't email her responses and they only write letters, but she has never received any letters from them, and she is concerned where her premium bonds are. Miss K says that apart from emails to say she's won prizes, she's never been able to access her account. Miss K made a complaint to NS&I.

NS&I did not uphold Miss K's complaint. They said on checking their records she is registered for the online and telephone service, and if she is unable to locate her correct password, it will need to be reset. They said they had included a premium bond withdrawal form and a further envelope as Miss K expressed an intention to withdraw her premium bonds. They said they had ordered her a bond record to be sent separately which would detail her current premium bond holdings. Miss K did not receive this, so she complained to NS&I.

NS&I upheld Miss K's complaint. They said no premium bond record was posted. They said they had requested another premium bond record to be sent to her and while her complaint remains not upheld for the original issues, it is now upheld for the promised bond record not being sent, so they arranged a payment for £75 to her bank account. Miss K brought her complaint to our service.

NS&I told us they would like to offer Miss K an additional £50 compensation as the complaint handlers had failed to realise that by ordering a bond record it is sent to her online documents (which she currently can't access). Our investigator said she thought the offer of an additional £50 compensation was fair. She said Miss K ought to be aware on how to reset her password or request an account closure now.

Miss K asked for an ombudsman to review her complaint. She made a number of points. In summary, she said she just wanted her money back and a statement from the moment she invested the premium bonds. Miss K said she's never had any paperwork and doesn't know anything about her money, and if it was ever cashed in.

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.

Miss K has made a number of points to this service, and I've considered and read everything she's said and sent us. But, in line with this service's role as a quick and informal body I'll be focusing on the crux of her complaint in deciding what's fair and reasonable here.

I'd like to explain to Miss K that it is not within this service's remit to tell a business which

methods they should communicate with a customer such as whether they send her post as opposed to an email. It would be the role of the regulator – the Financial Conduct Authority, who have the power to instruct NS&I to make changes to their policies and procedures, if necessary.

As NS&I hadn't sent the bond record to Miss K in a way she could access this, I asked our investigator if he could pass this onto Miss K to show her the total of her bonds, in addition to dates when she paid for the premium bonds and when her prizes were reinvested. I also downloaded the relevant form from NS&I's website and asked our investigator to forward this onto Miss K, so she could begin the process of withdrawing her funds.

Miss K responded and she said she thought she had invested £3,000 (as opposed to the £1,400 the records were showing – including reinvested prizes). She said she had deposited this in two separate payments between 2006-2007. She said she never had access to those two accounts. Miss K asked if NS&I would have any records of anything being cashed in over the years. She also wondered whether there were any bonds in her children's name at the same address.

NS&I have provided evidence that Miss K is the only person at her address with her surname and postcode which has a record with NS&I. They also completed a search of Miss K's surname and her date of birth, so this would have showed any holdings she had at a previous address. But only the one record showed on their system, which was Miss K's current address. They have also sent a screenshot of Miss K's holdings with them. This shows a total balance of £1,400. So I've seen no evidence that would suggest Miss K did invest £3,000 with NS&I. The information I asked our investigator to forward her to help her with her withdrawal does show that she made two investments to NS&I, in line with her recollection, but these amounts total £1,100.

The evidence shows Miss K originally bought premium bonds totalling £1,000 on 28 February 2006, and further premium bonds totalling £100 on 3 May 2006. She has won 10 prizes totalling £300 between 1 December 2006 and 3 April 2023, which have all been reinvested. NS&I have also confirmed that no repayments (withdrawals) have been made. So in the absence of any evidence from Miss K to show any other bond records, I'm satisfied that NS&I's records are an accurate reflection of Miss K's current holdings.

I've considered what Miss K has said about not receiving post from NS&I. But Miss K is set up for their online and telephone service. So NS&I would not send her letters, as my understanding is these would be sent to her secure online inbox. And she is notified of wins via email. From Miss K's system notes that NS&I hold, I can see she registered for online access on 29 January 2017, and she successfully logged onto her account this day. She also changed her bank details NS&I held for her. So I'm persuaded that Miss K was able to log in online, but the records show she didn't try and do this again until 4 March 2003.

There was confusion over the bond records being sent to Miss K. Although it appears they were ordered for her, as she was set up for online correspondence, these were accidentally sent to her online inbox – but she didn't have access to this. This is why Miss K didn't receive these, as they weren't actually posted to her.

It appears Miss K did receive the letter NS&I sent her dated 12 May 2023 as Miss K forwarded this to our service. NS&I said they included the withdrawal form and the envelope with the letter, but I can't evidence one way or another whether this was enclosed with the letter. But as Miss K hadn't received her bond record, she would have been unable to fill out the form without her bond numbers which were on her bond record.

So I've considered what would be a fair outcome for this complaint. NS&I have already paid

Miss K £75 for what happened, and they have offered her another £50 compensation. I'm satisfied that a total of £125 compensation is in line with our awards for what happened here. I say this as Miss K was led to believe things were posted out to her when they were sent to her online inbox instead. But as she couldn't access this, it seemed to Miss K that they were lying about sending this to her. So when she didn't receive the bond records the second time, this distressed her as she felt they were trying to hide something. So I'll be asking NS&I to pay Miss K the extra £50 compensation to her if they haven't already done so, but I don't require NS&I to do anything further.

Putting things right

NS&I have offered to pay Miss K a further £50 compensation for distress and inconvenience, to bring the total compensation to £125 which I think is reasonable in the circumstances.

My final decision

I uphold this complaint in part. National Savings and Investments should pay Miss K a total of £125 compensation (less anything they have already paid her) for distress and inconvenience.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Miss K to accept or reject my decision before 19 February 2024.

Gregory Sloanes
Ombudsman