

The complaint

Mr P complains Bank of Scotland plc provided him with poor service in relation to his Halifax accounts. Mr P says the closure of his accounts was unfair and the comments about his behaviour in branch are false accusations.

What happened

Mr P held three accounts with Halifax. Mr P regularly attended his local branch in London, but on 11 August 2023 he attended a different branch. Halifax says that during this visit Mr P was verbally abusive to staff.

Following this visit, Halifax made the decision to end its banking relationship with Mr P. It informed Mr P of this decision on 15 August 2023 and provided him with two months to make alternative banking arrangements. Mr P says he never received this letter.

Mr P says he attended branch on 16 October 2023 to pay money in an account and complete an internal transfer, and no mention was made of the impending closure of his accounts. Mr P says that on 16 October 2023 he was unable to access his accounts. Mr P says this had a detrimental impact on him as he was unable to pay bills and he had to borrow money to ensure he could meet his financial commitments. Mr P also says he didn't receive the closing balance cheque, which meant he was deprived of access to life savings. Mr P says the whole experience has had a huge impact on him and caused him significant stress and anxiety. Mr P says he is vulnerable, and Halifax should've taken more care when dealing with him and his accounts.

Halifax reviewed Mr P's concerns and in summary found that the account terms and conditions allowed it to close Mr P's account in this manner. It also explained it had re-issued the cheque it had sent to Mr P with his outstanding balance.

Unhappy with Halifax's response Mr P referred his complaint to our service. An Investigator reviewed the available evidence and found the following:

- Based on the available evidence, the incident in branch met the requirements for account closure based on the branch staff comments.
- The evidence didn't support Mr P's comments about being discriminated against.
- Halifax wasn't aware of the vulnerabilities he has outlined to this service.
- The issues with the closing balance cheque were unfortunate but Halifax reissued a cheque and dealt with the matters appropriately.
- The current account switch request was received after Mr P's accounts closed, so Halifax didn't act unreasonably in declining the switch.

Mr P remained unhappy and asked for an ombudsman to review his complaint.

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.

Firstly, I'm aware that I've only summarised Mr P's complaint points. No discourtesy is intended by this. Our rules allow me to take this approach. It simply reflects the informal nature of our service as a free alternative to the courts. I can assure Mr P I have carefully considered his points.

As a starting point I have considered whether Halifax acted fairly in its decision to close Mr P's account. I have thought about Mr P's comments about what happened in branch, and I am sorry to learn he feels he was poorly treated. As part of Halifax's review its obtained testimony from staff who have explained their version of events. These accounts refer to Mr P being verbally abusive to staff members. I can see Mr P strongly contends this description of his behaviour.

There is no CCTV footage of Mr P's visit to branch. I've therefore thought carefully about Mr P's comments alongside the comments of branch staff. As Mr P is already aware, his recollection of events and the comments from the branch staff are at odds. In situations where there is conflicting evidence, I must consider what I think is most likely to have occurred based on the available evidence.

I understand the branch Mr P visited wasn't his usual branch. Mr P says he commented about the opening hours of the branch. The testimony of the staff is quite detailed and explains Mr P was hostile and verbally abusive towards staff. Although I can't be certain of how events unfolded on the 11 August 2023 and what exactly was said, I am persuaded that given the detailed testimony of the staff members the visit in branch was challenging. Staff members felt Mr P's behaviour was inappropriate, and Halifax is under a duty to take these concerns seriously.

Halifax has provided its internal guidance on how to handle difficult situations in branch. This policy highlights that Halifax's overring responsibility is to look after and support its staff. In light of the comments made by branch staff and the policy I think its actions here – in particular the decision to end its banking relationship with Mr P - is reasonable and in keeping with its internal policy. I'm satisfied Halifax acted reasonably in making this decision.

Mr P says that he is a victim of discrimination as the staff in branch treated him with a hostile attitude when he asked reasonable questions. While I can appreciate this is his perspective, it is not my role to decide whether discrimination has taken place – only the courts have the power to decide this. I have, however, considered the relevant law in relation to what Mr P has said when deciding what I think is the fair and reasonable outcome. Part of this has meant considering the provisions of The Equality Act 2010 (The Act). And after looking at all the evidence, I've not seen anything to suggest that this was the case. I say this because Halifax's internal policy sets out how it is to handle situations where there is challenging behaviour, and it has followed this. So, I haven't found that Halifax has decided to close the account for an improper reason.

Halifax reviewed Mr P's accounts and made the difficult decision to end its banking relationship with Mr P, with two months' notice. The account terms and conditions allow Halifax to do this in specific circumstances. Mr P says he didn't receive the notice to close letter issued by Halifax, and he only found out the accounts closed when he tried to pay a bill. This is unfortunate and I appreciate the closure of Mr P's account came as a shock to him and caused him inconvenience. However, I can see the notice to close letter was sent to the correct address Halifax held for Mr P and I don't think it would be fair to hold Halifax responsible for any postal issues. Mr P has said Halifax should've contacted him via other channels, but Mr P hadn't specified any different communication needs. So I think it was reasonable for Halifax to issue him with a letter.

Mr P has also explained he wasn't informed of the closure when he attended branch in October 2023. Mr P attended branch to carry out transfers, and I don't think it may have been obvious in the information branch members had access to that the account was due to close. Halifax also wasn't aware Mr P hadn't received the notice to close letter, so I think it also would've been reasonable for staff to assume Mr P was aware of the impending closure.

Mr P has been open with this service about the impact the closure had on him and his vulnerabilities. Halifax does offer support for vulnerable customers, but it is only able to do so if it is aware of the individual needs. In Mr P's case I can't see Halifax had any awareness of any additional support Mr P may need. I understand Mr P feels this may have assisted him, especially when he attended branch, but this isn't something I think Halifax can be held responsible for given its lack of awareness.

I appreciate the closure of his accounts would've resulted in a level of stress given the need to make alternative arrangements. In Mr P's case the situation was exacerbated as he didn't receive the notice to close letter. Mr P has provided details of the impact, including the fact that funds had to be borrowed and he was unable to keep up to date with payments. Mr P feels he should be compensated by Halifax. However, I think Halifax acted fairly in closing the accounts and in line with the account terms and conditions. It provided Mr P with the necessary notice and although Mr P didn't receive this, I don't think it would be fair or reasonable to hold Halifax liable for this.

Halifax issued Mr P a cheque with the closing balance of his accounts. Mr P didn't receive this, and it had to be reissued by Halifax. Mr P says he was deprived of funds due to the delays in receiving the closing balance. But I can see Halifax issued the cheque promptly, and I don't think it can be held responsible for non-receipt, especially as Mr P has referred to postal issues in his area.

I've also considered Mr P's comments regarding his account switch. This request was received after his Halifax's accounts closed, so Halifax wasn't able to action the request. I understand Mr P has missed out on the switch incentive offered by his new bank, but this isn't something Halifax can be held responsible for.

I know my answer will be disappointing to Mr P, who strongly believes he was treated poorly by Halifax. I can understand why Mr P feels this way, but having looked at all the evidence, I'm satisfied Halifax acted fairly. I hope that it helps Mr P to know that someone impartial and independent has looked into his concerns.

My final decision

My final decision is that I don't uphold this complaint.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr P to accept or reject my decision before 19 December 2024.

Chandni Green
Ombudsman