

The complaint

G, a trust, complains that National Westminster Bank Plc mismanaged its account, and is unable to explain what happened to the account or to the money in it.

G has been represented in this complaint by Mrs F, the mother of the beneficiary of G.

What happened

An account in G's name was set up with NatWest in the early 1980s. The beneficiary of the trust was a child at the time and according to the limited evidence, the account was due to mature when she turned 18 in 1989. Mrs F has told us that she had no recollection of the account, and only became aware of it in 2023, when she found some old correspondence.

NatWest was initially unable to find any trace of the account. However, further extensive searches revealed an audit trail, showing that statements were sent every six months until 1989, when a closing statement was sent.

Mrs F has pointed out that the address that NatWest says statements were sent to was wrong, and was that of a neighbour. What's more, she says she banked personally with NatWest and notified it of a change of address a couple of years after G's account was opened.

Mrs F says it shouldn't have been possible to close the account without the consent of G's trustees. But they say they weren't involved in the closure of the account and know nothing about it.

One of our investigators considered the complaint, but didn't think it should be upheld. In summary, he said there was no evidence to suggest that NatWest had mismanaged G's account. He didn't think it was unreasonable that NatWest didn't hold records going back to the 1980s. And the correspondence address for G's account would have been separate from Mrs F's address, so wouldn't have changed automatically when Mrs F updated the address for her personal account. He said it was clear that NatWest had done all it could to try to locate the account, and it wasn't possible, without more information, to say why it had been closed in 1989.

G didn't accept the investigator's view, so the complaint's been passed to me.

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.

Having done so, I've reached the same conclusion as the investigator, and for similar reasons.

I know that there are questions which Mrs F would like to be answered, and I understand her frustration. But it's for this service to determine what evidence we need in order to investigate a complaint and reach a decision. In keeping with our role as an informal dispute resolution service, the purpose of my decision is not to address every point raised in detail, but to set out my conclusions and my reasons for reaching them.

NatWest has explained that its general systems show transaction information going back ten years. It says that some archived transaction information does go back a bit longer, but not as far as 1989.

Banks aren't obliged to retain customer records indefinitely, and they generally only keep them for up to six years. The very limited information NatWest has been able to find about G's account suggests that a closing statement was sent in 1989. It seems reasonable to assume that the account was closed then. That was more than 34 years ago. In the circumstances, I can't find that it's unreasonable of NatWest not to have more detailed records of G's account or why and how it was closed.

Mrs F has provided a copy of a letter from the apparent settlor of the trust to NatWest, which specifies that six-monthly statements are to be sent to Mrs F. But it gives the wrong house number. This is the address that NatWest has told Mrs F it sent the statements to.

It may be that all statements for the account were sent to a neighbouring house, rather than to Mrs F's correct address. But I can't reasonably conclude that NatWest was wrong to send the statements to the address that it had been specifically given for this purpose.

I acknowledge that Mrs F has provided a copy of a letter about the account, which NatWest sent to her correct address. But that letter concerned the trustee appointment document. I can't fairly conclude, based on the available evidence, that NatWest should have realised that the statement address it had been given for G's account was wrong.

I acknowledge that Mrs F says she had a personal account with NatWest and notified it of a change of address. But the trust account was in G's name, not Mrs F's. G was the customer, and I don't accept that an update to Mrs F's address on her personal account should automatically have resulted in an update to the statement address for G's account.

I'm satisfied that NatWest has made a considerable effort to find any further details of the account and what happened to it. It has carried out very thorough and extensive searches. I'm satisfied that it's done all that it can reasonably be expected to do, but sadly it hasn't been able to find anything further. I realise that G will be disappointed with my decision, and I'm sorry about that. I don't underestimate how frustrating it must be not to know what happened to the account or the money in it. But On the basis of the limited evidence available, I can't fairly conclude that NatWest mismanaged the account, or that it could or should have made further efforts to locate it.

NatWest has told us that if G manages to find any further relevant information, it would be happy to investigate further. But on the basis of the limited information provided to date, I can't fairly require it to do more.

My final decision

My decision is that I do not uphold this complaint.

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

Juliet Collins
Ombudsman