

The complaint

Mr M complains that in 2012, Options UK Personal Pensions LLP ('Options', trading as Carey Pensions UK LLP at the relevant time) didn't carry out adequate due diligence when it accepted his Self-Invested Personal Pension ('SIPP') application and allowed him to invest in Store First Limited ('Store First'). He says he has suffered a loss as a result of this.

Mr M wants to be put back into the position he would have been in had Options not accepted his SIPP application.

Mr M is represented by a claims management company ('CMC'), but I'll refer mainly to Mr M.

What happened – the parties

Given the various parties involved in Mr M's pension transfer and subsequent investment I've set out a summary of each below, along with a summary of some of the key events in their relationships.

Options

Options is a SIPP provider and administrator. At the time of the events in this complaint, Options was regulated by the Financial Services Authority ("FSA"), which later became the Financial Conduct Authority ("FCA"). Options was authorised, in relation to SIPPs, to arrange (bring about) deals in investments, to deal in investments as principal, to establish, operate or wind up a pension scheme, and to make arrangements with a view to transactions in investments. Ms H is, and was at the time of the relevant events, Options' CEO.

CL&P

CL&P was an unregulated business based in Spain. At the time of the events here, one of the directors of CL&P was a Terence (Terry) Wright. On 15 October 2010, the following was published on the FSA website, in a section called "*Firms and individuals to avoid*", which was described as: "*a warning list of some unauthorised firms and individuals that we believe you should not deal with*":

“ALERT

The Financial Services Authority (“FSA”) has today published this statement in order to warn investors against dealing with unauthorised firms.

The purpose of this statement is to advise members of the public that an individual

Terence (Terry) Wright

is not authorised under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA) to carry on a regulated activity in the UK. Regulated activities include, amongst other things, advising on investments. The FSA believes that the individual may be targeting UK customers via the firm Cash In Your Pension.

Investors should be aware that the Financial Ombudsman Service and the Financial Services Compensation Scheme [FSCS] are not available if you deal with an unauthorised company or individual.

To find out whether a company or individual is authorised go to our Register of authorised firms and individuals at <http://www.fsa.gov.uk/register/home.do>

In other complaints brought to the Financial Ombudsman, Options has told us that it was first approached by CL&P in 2011 and that it entered into discussions about accepting introductions from it. And that Options began to accept introductions from CL&P on 15 August 2011 and ended its relationship with it on 25 May 2012.

The Pension Specialist/Douglas Baillie Ltd

The Pension Specialist ('TPS') was an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd from 24 May 2011 to 13 November 2013. At the time of TPS's involvement, Douglas Baillie Ltd was an FCA regulated financial adviser.

In October 2013 Douglas Baillie Ltd suspended its pension switching business 'The Pension Specialist', following the FCAs concerns about the standard of the advice it was giving.

In 2016 Douglas Baillie Ltd went into Financial Services Compensation Scheme ('FSCS') default.

For ease, I'll now refer to all actions of TPS as being that of Douglas Baillie Ltd, except where I'm referencing a direct quotation or where I think it's appropriate to differentiate.

Based on the available evidence, I've set out below a summary of what I consider to be the key events during the relationship between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd:

20 October 2011 – An Introducer Profile and an Introducer Agreement between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd was signed. This set out Options' terms of business and the conduct it expected of Douglas Baillie Ltd.

12 December 2011 – Options received its first client from Douglas Baillie Ltd.

12 March 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms H at Options to say:

"As you may be aware, we have started sending some transfer cases to your company."

The email outlined a query on one of these cases and asked exactly how Options' process works. Douglas Baillie Ltd asked:

"I spoke to one of your colleagues last week to find out what we need to send to you along with the applications. She advised your [sic] need to see a copy of our advice letter and any TVAS. Please confirm this is the case."

16 March 2012 – Ms H at Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to detail that her understanding of the agreed process was that:

"The Pensions Specialists (TPS) are providing full advice on transfer of occupational pension schemes to a SIPP (with us), and will provide us copies of TVAS and advice letter."

The Pensions Specialists are appointed as advisers for the purpose of the transfer of existing occupational arrangements and the establishment of the SIPP for which they will be paid from the transfer fund. TPS will get the adviser page of our application form completed and signed by each client.

We will on receipt of the SIPP application log TPS as adviser for the purposes of the transfer and SIPP establishment and keep TPS informed of progress of the transfer and copy them in on correspondence to the client including the welcome letter.

On receipt of the transfer of funds we will advise TPS as well as client

TPS will invoice the scheme for the transfer advice which we will pay

On receipt of the completion of the transaction TPS will send us a letter resigning as adviser which we will record on our systems.”

18 May 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms H to say:

“Thank you for taking the time out to see [TPS Director] & Co earlier today. [TPS Director] mentioned that there were a couple of accounts that you have refused business from, as I tend to be closer to the accounts, can you confirm who they are please. This way, I can ensure that [TPS office] are aware of any blacklisted firms and that we can avoid them as well.”

4 September 2012 – Ms H emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say:

“We are currently considering our position going forward with regard to receiving business that is advised on transfer but not on-going and for investments and we may not continue with this line of business, however, it would be helpful for me to understand where you are currently getting the introductions from for the transfer work can you please provide me a list of introducers that you are currently doing transfer advice for to assist me to consider further.”

4 October 2012 – Options accepted its last client from Douglas Baillie Ltd.

4 October 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms H to say:

“We are changing our process slightly so that we are advised (where possible) in advance of a SIPP transfer being made, the expected investment that is going to be made.

Whilst we don't intend to comment on this investment, our intention is to ensure that the selected SIPP provider will allow this in advance of the SIPP application being made.

Can you provide me with a list of alternative investments that you are currently allowing?

I am also hoping that we can convert some of our other introducers who don't currently use you to do so by us taking control of where the SIPP should be placed.”

6 October 2012 - Ms H emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say:

“This is welcomed attached is a list of alternatives we have accepted.

Another point however, we need to know on the form who the introducer of the business is to you, I advised you that we had de-listed CLP and would not deal with them but we have some information from a member of your team who said in passing to a member of my team when we were asking about the investments they wanted to transact, that they would check with CLP. If you are sending us business that has been introduced by CLP please stop, we do not want to be associated with them as an introducing firm of business to us as we as I [sic] have said to you before that they offer incentives to the client for transacting the transfer and I understood that you too had concerns, is there any reason why you are still transacting business with them."

8 October 2012 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Ms H at Options to say:

"Thank you for the list, this will assist us going forward.

Like your own decision, we have also decided to stop accepting new business from CLP and are only processing cases that are already in the pipeline.

As far as I am aware, we have not sent you any new cases other than the pipeline cases that were agreed when your original decision was made.

Unfortunately due to the timescales involved in our process, the pipeline has taken some time to run down.

I have two clients on my desk who have requested to transfer benefits into their existing [Options] SIPPs. These are [client name] and [client name]. Are you willing to accept these or not? We may or may not receive further requests from existing clients of yours to proceed with incremental transfers.

I will ensure that no further CLP pipeline cases come your way.

For your own information, we also took the step of writing to all CLP clients that were processed prior to your decision, asking them to confirm if they had been offered any form of incentive. We received no responses confirming this.

Since then we added a disclaimer in our process and have now added a letter that each client must sign confirming that no incentives have been offered. This covers all new cases and not just any pipeline CLP cases.

More than happy to provide you with the name of the introducing firm with each new application form as hopefully by working together on this we can eliminate any rogue introducers."

5 February 2013 – Douglas Baillie Ltd emailed Options to say:

"Following the recent FSA alert regarding unregulated investments into SIPP's, we are reviewing our process to ensure that we are providing the best possible service to our clients, and we are also reviewing each provider's stance on different investments and the pension transfer process. With this in mind, I would be grateful if you could confirm the following:"

Douglas Baillie Ltd's email went on to list a series of questions concerning Options' position on the types of transfers and investments it was willing to accept.

6 February 2013 – Options' Head of Operations and Technical replied to Douglas Baillie Ltd saying:

“Further to your email, I have noted below your queries with clarification of our position in bold for ease of reference.

- 1. Are you still willing to accept transfers on an insistent client basis where we have advised a client against a transfer, but we have a letter from them stating that they still wish to proceed anyway? **We do not accept final salary transfers on an insistent client basis and have not done so since last year. In line with the recent FSA Alert we would not accept insistent clients on the basis you describe.***
- 2. Are you willing to accept subsequent investment into unregulated investments where we have advised a client against it, but have a letter from them stating they still wish to proceed? **No – as the adviser you would need to advise the client on all aspects of their scheme including investments.***
- 3. Are you still willing to accept pension transfer business where the client is to be orphaned once the transfer is complete, prior to any investment being made? **No, this would not follow the recent FSA clarifications of their requirements and expectations in respect of advisers.”***

Regarding what investments Options would accept, Options said:

“GAS Verdant Australian Farmland – Currently accepted but will be subject to a re-review process” and “Store First Ltd – Not currently accepting new business as under review”.

Store First

The Store First investment took the form of one or more self-storage units, which were part of a larger storage facility in a UK location. Investors bought one or more units in the facility (“pods”) and were offered a guaranteed level of income for a set period of time. After that, they could either take whatever income the unit(s) provided or sell them (assuming there was a market for them). Mr W was a Director of Store First Limited and Harley Scott Holdings Limited, the promoter of Store First.

The Store First investment was marketed as offering a guaranteed 8% return in the first two years, an indicated return of 10% in the following two years, and 12% in the next two years. It was also marketed as offering a “*guaranteed*” buy back after five years. But little of this materialised. It seems most investors received one- or two-years’ income of 8%, but nothing beyond that. And investors have found it very difficult to sell, with those that have sold receiving a small fraction of the amount they paid for their pods.

In the judgment in *Adams v Options SIPP UK LLP (formerly Options Pensions UK LLP)* [2020] EWHC 1299 (Ch) (‘Adams v Options’), the judge found the value of Mr Adams’ six pods, acquired for around £52,000 in July 2012, to be £15,000 as of January 2017. And in the judgement in *Adams v Options UK Personal Pensions LLP* [2021] EWCA Civ 1188 it was stated that, in February 2020, Options had said it was valuing Storepods at £430 each following (then) recent sales of Store First storage units at auction and the Court used that value in assessing the redress due to Mr Adams.

The available evidence shows the following actions were taken by Options in relation to the Store First investment at the dates mentioned. Some of these actions were taken before Options sent Mr M’s money to Store First for investment in January 2013.

On **3 May 2011** Options was contacted by a promoter of Store First, Harley Scott, about a newly launched product – Store First. Options agreed to put the investment through its review process.

In its submissions to us Options says this review process was established in accordance with its obligations and FSA recommendations at the time, which required it to conduct “*due diligence into the Store First investment to assess its suitability for holding within a SIPP*”.

In the letter confirming its acceptance of the investment, Options noted:

- The investor purchases a 250 year lease of a storage unit within a storage facility. The unit is then sublet to the management company, Store First, subject to an initial 6 year term with 2 year break clauses.
- The investor's interest can be sold/assigned at any time. The break clauses allow the investor to rent out the units individually without the services of the management company (but it insisted they use the management company).
- There was no apparent established market for the investment.
- The investment was potentially illiquid in that it was a direct property investment which may take time to sell. However, it could be sold providing a willing buyer can be found and was assignable so could be transferred in specie to beneficiaries.

It also said its acceptance was subject to a member declaration and indemnity being completed and signed by each member, and the appointment of a solicitor to act for the Trustees in respect of any purchase.

The High Court *Adams* judgment refers to an internal Options email of **20 May 2012**, referring to a conversation between Options and Store First about the levels of commission that were generally paid to brokers. This said Store First had told Options it believed CL&P's commission to be 12%.

17 August 2012 – a member bulletin was sent to Options by an information service it subscribed to which included the following:

“Storefirst Limited

We are aware of a web-based news article that mentions ‘[Mr W’s] firm faces tax investigation’ and goes on to reference notes made within the February 2011 accounts of Harley Scott Holdings. [The information service] has sought confirmation from [Mr W] on this and have been referred to [Store First’s auditors] who [the information service] understands to be the Harley Scott accountants. [Store First’s auditors] have supplied a letter to [the information service] to clarify the position regarding Store First, however as the letter is addressed to [the information service] we have been asked not to circulate the letter as [Store First’s auditors] wish to control its distribution. [Store First’s auditors] have agreed though to issue a similar letter addressed to individual SIPP operators/trustees upon request. We will leave it to our [the information service] clients to decide whether they require such a letter, however where a letter is required, the contact details for [Store First’s auditors] are below and they are on notice they may receive requests from clients of [the information service].”

17 August 2012 – Options suspended its acceptance of the investment “*because of concerns about the administration and system and controls of the investment provider.*”

20 August 2012 – Store First’s auditors sent a letter to Options, which included the following:

“We confirm that the tax enquiry referred to in the Harley Scott group of companies accounts to 28 February 2011 do not include either Group First Limited nor Store First Limited and furthermore, neither Group First Limited nor Store First Limited are currently under tax enquiry.”

27 September 2012 – Options lifted its suspension on accepting Store First. An internal Options email of that date from Ms H, sent to the Carey Group CEO and other senior members of staff, confirms this. The email from Ms H included the following:

“My view is we can start again? As long as we have put the requisite processes and controls in place to be on their case should we not receive what we are expecting, also do we need to make our member declarations clearer re what option the clients have selected eg guaranteed and non-guaranteed to ensure there is no come back on us at a later date that they did not realise.”

27 September 2012 – A reply to the above email from the CEO of the wider Carey Group, which simply said “I agree” (to the suggestion in Ms H’s email).

January 2013 – Options invested £65,250 into Store First on Mr M’s instructions.

5 April 2013 – Options’ technical review committee decides it will accept no further Store First investments. The note of this meeting refers to an FSA letter dated 11 January 2012 raising concerns about outstanding loans from Store First to Mr W. In previous submissions to us, Options has said:

“CPUK [Options] took this decision because, by April 2013, it had received a number of queries and concerns from its customers and other sources which CPMK considered had not been satisfactorily resolved by Store First. CPMK wanted to act quickly to protect its customers and therefore ceased administering investments into Store First.”

In May 2014, the Self Storage Association of the UK (“SSA UK”) issued a press release (amended in January 2015), detailing the outcome of a review it had commissioned Deloitte LLP to undertake of the marketing material made available to potential investors by Store First. The release referred to a number of misleading and inaccurate statements made by Store First in its marketing material. It also made the following observation:

“... a very serious question arises over how Store First is funding the guaranteed returns to existing investors, considering the absence of bank funding and the likely level of losses that require funding in each new store. It may yet prove to be the case that the rental returns being paid to investors are in fact being funded from the sale proceeds of new units, and not the operation of the self-storage business.”

Store First was the subject of a winding up petition issued by the Business Secretary in 2017. On 30 April 2019 the courts made an order shutting down Store First and three of the related companies by consent between those four companies and the Secretary of State. The Official Receiver was appointed as liquidator. At the time, the Chief Investigator for the Insolvency Service said:

“These four companies unscrupulously secured millions of pounds worth of investments using a variety of methods that misled investors, particularly those with pension savings.”

The court rightly recognised the sheer scale of the problem caused by Store First's sales of a flawed business model, based on misrepresentation and misleading information and has shut down these companies in recognition of the damage done to investors retirement plans."

Following this the freehold, associated assets and goodwill of 15 storage centres were sold by the Official Receiver to a company called Store First Freeholds Limited. As I understand it, the self-storage units continued to be rented to end users and a company called Pay Store now manages the storage sites trading as Store First. The Official Receiver and Store First Freeholds Limited agreed that the latter would accept any requests from investors to surrender their pods. Store First Freeholds Limited would cover its own costs of the surrender, but investors wouldn't receive any payment.

What happened – Mr M's dealings with CL&P, Douglas Baillie Ltd and Options

Mr M has explained that he has little recollection of the events, due to the length of time that has passed and because he did not have a full understanding at the time. He says he was contacted by telephone by someone asking about his pension, and that person said he "*could be put in touch with somebody to look at [his] pension*".

Mr M told us, "*I can only recall a man called Douglas Baillie who dealt with everything. I remember I was told about an investment and it seemed really good how the people explained it ... Forms sent to me from Carey pension followed ... [My understanding was] that I owned Storage Units and got money back for people renting them. Nobody said there were any risks ... I was just told Carey were who my pension would now be with*".

The documentation suggests that Mr M was referred to Douglas Baillie Ltd by a third party. Although Mr M does not specifically recall the name 'CL&P', it is probable, based on the similarities between what happened in Mr M's case and others where CL&P has been identified, that this third party was CL&P, or another unregulated introducer.

Douglas Baillie Ltd prepared a letter for Mr M dated on 25 May 2012 explaining its understanding that Mr M wished to transfer to an Options SIPP, and saying that Douglas Baillie Ltd had been asked to provide "*advice on a transfer into SIPP*". This letter (the 'advice letter') also, amongst other things:

- Said it had been confirmed that Mr M's "*preferred SIPP provider*" was Options as "*they are able to administer the selected investment that you wish to make within your SIPP*".
- Said the transfer value from Mr M's ceding scheme was around £71,000 and that to provide a benefit equal to the ceding scheme an annual return of 6.4% (7.5% including fees) would be required.
- Said, "*We do not provide clients with ongoing advice once the SIPP has been established. We will therefore be arranging for your SIPP to be "Orphaned" once the transfers have been completed*" – it explained this meant Douglas Baillie Ltd would be removed as his servicing agent/adviser.
- Set out the five "*main advantages*" of a transfer, along with three disadvantages, and proceeded to a section which began, "*The recommendations are suitable for you for the following reasons ...*" Four reasons were then given.
- Set out some additional risks applicable to Occupational Final Salary Pension Transfers, including losing any guarantees attached to the scheme.

- Said Mr M had already indicated he wished to proceed with the transfer.
- Explained that Douglas Baillie Ltd had not been asked to advise on the intended investment, and that the business was being transacted on a “*limited advice basis*”.
- Said that it had not been provided with a “*financial planning profiler*” for Mr M so did not have knowledge on his personal circumstances.
- Detailed the documents that needed to be completed, signed and returned in order to proceed.

On 30 May 2012 Mr M signed an Options’ SIPP application form. This detailed his personal information, his employment status – unemployed, and beneficiary nomination and explained that he’d be transferring an occupational pension into the SIPP. The pages for investment details were left blank. Douglas Baillie Ltd’s details were included in the section asking for details of who had advised on the transfer, and on the page for ‘Financial Adviser Details’. In the section relating to adviser fees, it read:

“PLEASE NOTE OUR FEE IS FOR ADVICE ON TRANSFER ONLY, NO ADVICE HAS BEEN GIVEN BY US ON INVESTMENT”

On page 14 of the application form Mr M signed a declaration which included, amongst other statements, the following:

“I agree to indemnify Carey Pensions UK LLP ‘The Administrator’ and Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd ‘The Trustee’ against any claim in respect of any decision made by myself or my Financial Adviser/Investment Manager or any other professional adviser I choose to appoint from time to time.”

“I understand that Carey Pensions UK LLP and Carey Pensions Trustees UK Ltd are not in anyway [sic] able to provide me with any advice.”

“I confirm that I am establishing the Carey Pension Scheme on an execution only basis.”

Options received this application form, from Douglas Baillie Ltd, on or around 21 June 2012 and the SIPP was established. The funds from Mr M’s ceding scheme, a defined benefit (DB) scheme – around £71,000 – were received by Options in October 2012.

Mr M also signed a document, provided by Options, called, “*SIPP Member Instruction and Declaration, Alternative Investment – Store First*”. This read:

“... I, [Mr M], the SIPP Member, Beneficiary, as described above instruct Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd to Purchase a Leasehold Storage Unit Investment with Storefirst as undernoted, on my behalf for [The Carey Pension] Scheme.

Number of Storage Units to be purchased 5 at a cost of £13,050 per unit. Total cost purchase cost (sic) of investment £65,250.

~~*I have chosen the Guaranteed Income Option.*~~

Or

I have chosen the Variable Income Option.

(delete as appropriate)

I attach a copy of my Store First Reservation form.

I confirm that:

- 1. I understand that Carey Pensions UK LLP as the Administrator and Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd as the Trustee of the Scheme act on an Execution Only Basis upon my instruction.*
- 2. Neither Carey Pensions UK LLP nor Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd have provided any advice, whatsoever, in respect of the SIPP or this investment, including but not limited to financial, investment, tax advice, (sic)*
- 3. No information provided to me by either Carey Pensions UK LLP or Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd will or is considered by me as advice or recommendation.*
- 4. I understand this investment is an Unregulated "Alternative Investment" and as such is considered High Risk and Speculative and that it may prove difficult to value, sell / realise.*
- 5. I understand that as an Unregulated Investment the Financial Services Compensation Scheme will not apply.*
- 6. I fully understand that the values of investments can fall as well as rise and that my entire investment may be lost.*
- 7. I have reviewed and understand the information and documentation provided by Storefirst, including but not limited to marketing materials, Reservation Form, Contracts.*
- 8. I acknowledge and confirm my understanding that if a valuation is required, for any reason, this may be Will (sic) entail a valuation of the unit(s) that may be difficult to obtain and that the costs of for (sic) any valuation will need to be met by my scheme.*
- 9. I have taken my own advice, including but not limited to, financial, investment and tax advice regarding the investment and its value, taxes, costs and fees.*
- 10. In the event of my demise, if Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd is unable to sell the asset within HMRC timescales it may be transferred to my beneficiaries through my estate and accordingly may be subject to Inheritance or other taxes.*
- 11. Should any aspect of this investment be deemed by HMRC to provide Taxable Moveable Property, or be deemed a trading company and/or any other tax charges be deemed by HMRC to apply in future these will be paid directly from the fund or by me as the Member of the Scheme.*
- 12. In the event that any local or other taxes become due these will be paid by my SIPP.*
- 13. I undertake to forgo the right to personal usage and that any breach of this undertaking will result in HMRC levying tax charge penalties on both me personally and my SIPP.*
- 15. (sic) I fully understand that this investment is reliant upon Storefirst being able to rent out the unit(s).*

16. *I confirm that my business / occupation is not renting out storage units.*
17. *I instruct Carey Pensions to appoint the following solicitor to act on behalf of the Scheme: [details of solicitor]*
18. *I confirm that I agree to [name of solicitor] fee of £400 + VAT for transacting this investment.*
19. *I confirm I am fully aware that additional costs will be incurred in this transaction including, but not limited to: £48 CHAPs Fee; £8 Land Registry Search Fee; Stamp Duty Land Tax – To be advised by Solicitor at completion; Any other taxes – To be advised by Solicitor at completion;*
20. *I understand my SIPP must have sufficient funds at outset to complete the purchase and confirm that if, for any reason, the purchase does not complete that my Scheme and / or me as the Member will be liable to pay any accrued fees.*
21. *I fully understand it is my responsibility to ensure my SIPP has sufficient funds at all times to meet its liabilities and costs and agree that any and all fees and costs will be paid by my Scheme, or in the event of default, by me personally.*
22. *I agree and confirm that as I am investing in a potentially illiquid investment I will retain at least five (5) years worth of fees on my SIPP Bank Account.*
23. *Neither I nor any person “connected to me” or associated with me has or will receive any form of inducement whether monetary or otherwise for transacting this investment.*

I indemnify both Carey Pensions UK LLP and Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd against:

- a. Any and all claims, demands, actions, suits, losses, costs, charges, expenses, damages, and liabilities whatsoever which Carey Pension Trustees UK Limited and / or Carey Pensions UK LLP may pay, sustain, suffer or incur in connection with any aspect of this investment.*
- b. In the case of purchase of land / property, I indemnify both Carey Pensions UK LLP and Carey Pension Trustees UK Ltd against any and all liability whatsoever arising from any environmental or other land related issue.*
- c. All current and/or future tax liabilities and issues howsoever arising.*

I agree to Carey Pensions Fee of £500 + VAT, amounting for transacting this investment.

Signed By Member ...”

From the information I've seen, it appears that Mr M was first asked to sign a version of this document (which I'll now refer to as the 'Member Declaration and Indemnity') in or around September 2012 but, following updates being made to the form, Options required him to sign another – the contents of which I've quoted above – in December 2012. Between these two dates, in November 2012, Douglas Baillie Ltd wrote to Options asking that it be removed as Mr M's financial adviser.

An investment of £65,250 was then made in Store First with the purchase completing in

January 2013.

Mr M has told us that he received £3,000 as part of this transaction. He's said that he didn't tell Options about the payment because he didn't know it had to be told.

Options has said that in March 2015 Mr M instructed it to sell his Store First units, stating, "*Storefirst have broken all of their investment promises, and I wish to have my money back as soon as possible.*" I understand that he received no offers and his units remained untenanted.

In June 2015 Options valued Mr M's investment in Store First at 50% of the purchase price.

In May 2017 Mr M approached a CMC because he was concerned he'd received poor advice. As a result, Mr M's CMC requested information from Options. Mr M then submitted a claim to the FSCS in respect of Douglas Baillie Ltd. In March 2018 the FSCS calculated Mr M's total loss as over £130,000 and paid him its maximum of £50,000 in compensation.

The FSCS, in January 2019, provided Mr M with a reassignment of rights to enable him to pursue a complaint against Options.

Mr M's complaint

In 2020 Mr M complained to Options – Options says it received this complaint on 20 January 2020. In summary, he complained that:

- His pension funds had been invested in investments that were known to Options to be unregulated, high risk, highly speculative, and "*clearly unsuitable*".
- He was not an experienced investor and had no understanding of this complex investment – an unregulated introducer had recommended that he transfer his pension benefits "*in order to gain a better pension*".
- Options had failed to identify the risks involved by accepting a non-advised instruction for him to transfer his pension into an "*unregulated, complex, high risk and illiquid investment*".
- Options had caused his losses by failing to conduct an adequate assessment of the business it was accepting, ignoring its responsibility to safeguard his interests and allowing him to set up a "*detrimental SIPP*".
- He'd been guided and influenced by an unregulated introducer – Options should have made further checks to confirm his position.
- Options had allowed him to be misled through a "*total disregard*" of the FCA's Principles – Options were negligent and failed in its regulatory duties.

Options responded to Mr M's complaint on 14 February 2020. It said its records indicate Mr M used the services of TPS, an FCA regulated firm. It declined to respond further as it said Mr M's complaint was time-barred on the basis that it had been more than six years since Mr M's SIPP was opened (June 2012) and his investment made (January 2013), and more than three years since Mr M had been put on notice to raise any concerns he had about the loss in investment value.

Options said the June 2015 valuation put him on notice of the decline in his investment value (the issue, Options said, he now wishes to complain about), and that in May 2017 Options

had provided his CMC with “a full member data print” giving the CMC “all the information they needed to ascertain the issues with [Mr M’s] case”.

Unhappy with Options’ response, Mr M brought his complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service. On his behalf his CMC said that Mr M had not known he had lost all his pension funds in 2015. It also said, “our client had no understanding that he could hold Options responsible ... Options are accountable for carrying out poor due diligence and as a result of this negligence Options are responsible for his losses”.

Options’ submissions

Options maintained that Mr M’s complaint is time-barred.

Our Investigator’s view

Mr M’s complaint was considered by one of our Investigators who concluded it had been referred to us within the time limits that apply to the Financial Ombudsman Service. She acknowledged that Mr M had referred his complaint to us more than six years after the events he complains about. However, she concluded that he had complained within three years of when he’d become aware, or should reasonably have become aware, that he had cause to complain about Options.

She said that whilst Mr M’s complaint does concern the loss arising from the investment, that is not the main focus – the complaint is that if Options had completed adequate checks, he wouldn’t have been able to make the unsuitable investment he made. She said there was nothing in the June 2015 valuation that ought to have indicated to Mr M that Options had, or was likely to have, any responsibility for the position he was in.

Options disagreed with the view. I have summarised below what I consider to be the key points of Options’ disagreement but have considered Options’ response in its entirety. Options said:

- It remains of the view Mr M’s complaint is time-barred.
- The rules relating to our time limits are silent as to any requirement for the complainant to know *who* is responsible for their cause to complain. The Investigator has erred in the test they have applied – Mr M could and should have complained to Options much earlier.
- The Investigator does not provide any explanation of when or how somewhere between 2015 and 2020, when the Complaint was made, Mr M developed an understanding of Options’ obligations.
- The investigator has taken Mr M’s statement that he first contacted his CMC in May 2017, at face value.
- It requested an oral hearing to explore when Mr M became aware (or ought reasonably to have become aware) he had cause to complain.

As no agreement could be reached, the complaint was passed to me to review afresh and make a decision.

My provisional findings

I recently issued a provisional decision on this complaint. I concluded Mr M’s complaint

should be upheld.

At the same time, I set out my view that Mr M's complaint is not time barred and can be considered by the Financial Ombudsman Service. I also explained why I'm satisfied it's not necessary for me to hold an oral hearing. My conclusions about those matters remain unchanged, so I won't repeat them here.

Options didn't respond to the provisional decision. Mr M responded, through his representative, to say he accepted the decision.

As I have not received any further submissions from either party about the merits of Mr M's complaint and have not been persuaded to depart from my provisional findings, I have repeated my provisional findings below, as my final decision, and have not therefore included any further detail of them in this background summary.

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.

As noted above, I haven't received any further submissions from either party since issuing my provisional decision and haven't been persuaded to depart from my provisional findings. So, I've repeated those findings below, with a few minor changes, as my final decision.

Relevant considerations

I'm required to determine this complaint by reference to what I consider to be fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. When considering what is fair and reasonable, I am required to take into account: 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 relevant time.

With that in mind I'll start by setting out what I have identified as the relevant considerations to deciding what is fair and reasonable in this case.

The Principles

In my view, the FCA's Principles for Businesses are of particular relevance to my decision. The Principles for Businesses, which are set out in the FCA's handbook "*are a general statement of the fundamental obligations of firms under the regulatory system*" (PRIN 1.1.2G). I consider that the Principles relevant to this complaint include Principles 2, 3 and 6 which say:

"Principle 2 – Skill, care and diligence – A firm must conduct its business with due skill, care and diligence.

Principle 3 – Management and control – A firm must take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively, with adequate risk management systems.

Principle 6 – Customers' interests – A firm must pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly."

I have carefully considered the relevant law and what this says about the application of the FCA's Principles. In *R (British Bankers Association) v Financial Services Authority* [2011] EWHC 999 (Admin) ("BBA") Ouseley J said at paragraph 162:

"The Principles are best understood as the ever present substrata to which the specific rules are added. The Principles always have to be complied with. The Specific rules do not supplant them and cannot be used to contradict them. They are but specific applications of them to the particular requirement they cover. The general notion that the specific rules can exhaust the application of the Principles is inappropriate. It cannot be an error of law for the Principles to augment specific rules."

And at paragraph 77 of BBA Ouseley J said:

"Indeed, it is my view that it would be a breach of statutory duty for the Ombudsman to reach a view on a case without taking the Principles into account in deciding what would be fair and reasonable and what redress to afford. Even if no Principles had been produced by the FSA, the FOS would find it hard to fulfil its particular statutory duty without having regard to the sort of high level Principles which find expression in the Principles, whoever formulated them. They are of the essence of what is fair and reasonable, subject to the argument about their relationship to specific rules."

In *R (Berkeley Burke SIPP Administration Ltd) v Financial Ombudsman Service* [2018] EWHC 2878 ("BBSAL"), Berkeley Burke brought a judicial review claim challenging the decision of an Ombudsman who had upheld a consumer's complaint against it. The Ombudsman considered the FCA Principles and good industry practice at the relevant time. He concluded that it was fair and reasonable for Berkeley Burke to have undertaken due diligence in respect of the investment before allowing it into the SIPP wrapper, and that if it had done so, it would have refused to accept the investment. The Ombudsman found Berkeley Burke had therefore not complied with its regulatory obligations and had not treated its client fairly.

Jacobs J, having set out some paragraphs of BBA including paragraph 162 set out above, said (at paragraph 104 of BBSAL):

"These passages explain the overarching nature of the Principles. As the FCA correctly submitted in their written argument, the role of the Principles is not merely to cater for new or unforeseen circumstances. The judgment in BBA shows that they are, and indeed were always intended to be, of general application. The aim of the Principles based regulation described by Ouseley J. was precisely not to attempt to formulate a code covering all possible circumstances, but instead to impose general duties such as those set out in Principles 2 and 6."

The BBSAL judgment also considers section 228 FSMA and the approach an Ombudsman is to take when deciding a complaint. The judgment of Jacobs J in BBSAL upheld the lawfulness of the approach taken by the Ombudsman in that complaint, which I have described above, and included the Principles and good industry practice at the relevant time as relevant considerations that were required to be taken into account.

As outlined above, Ouseley J in the BBA case held that it would be a breach of statutory duty if I were to reach a view on a complaint without taking the Principles into account in deciding what is fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of a case. And, Jacobs J adopted a similar approach to the application of the Principles in BBSAL. I'm therefore satisfied that the Principles are a relevant consideration and I will consider them in the specific circumstances of this complaint.

The *Adams* court cases and COBS 2.1.1R

On 18 May 2020, the High Court handed down its judgment in the case of *Adams v Options SIPP* [2020] EWHC 1229 (Ch). Mr Adams subsequently appealed the decision of the High Court and, on 1 April 2021, the Court of Appeal handed down its judgment in *Adams v Options UK Personal Pensions LLP* [2021] EWCA Civ 474. I've taken account of both these judgments and the judgment in *Adams v Options UK Personal Pensions LLP* [2021] EWCA Civ 1188 when making this decision on Mr M's case. I note the Supreme Court refused Options permission to appeal the Court of Appeal judgment.

I've considered whether *Adams* means that the Principles should not be taken into account in deciding this case. I note that the Principles for Businesses didn't form part of Mr Adams' pleadings in his initial case against Options SIPP. And, HHJ Dight didn't consider the application of the Principles to SIPP operators in his judgment. The Court of Appeal also gave no consideration to the application of the Principles to SIPP operators. So, neither of the judgments say anything about how the Principles apply to an Ombudsman's consideration of a complaint. But, to be clear, I don't say this means *Adams* isn't a relevant consideration at all. As noted above, I've taken account of the *Adams* judgments when making this decision on Mr M's case.

I acknowledge that COBS 2.1.1R (A firm must act honestly, fairly and professionally in accordance with the best interests of its client) overlaps with certain of the Principles and that this rule was considered by HHJ Dight in the High Court case. Mr Adams pleaded that Options SIPP owed him a duty to comply with COBS 2.1.1R, a breach of which, he argued, was actionable pursuant to section 138(D) of FSMA ("the COBS claim"). HHJ Dight rejected this claim and found that Options SIPP had complied with the best interests rule on the facts of Mr Adams' case.

Although the Court of Appeal ultimately overturned HHJ Dight's judgment, it rejected that part of Mr Adams appeal that related to HHJ Dight's dismissal of the COBS claim on the basis that Mr Adams was seeking to advance a case that was radically different to that found in his initial pleadings. The Court found that this part of Mr Adams' appeal did not so much represent a challenge to the grounds on which HHJ Dight had dismissed the COBS claim, but rather was an attempt to put forward an entirely new case.

I note that HHJ Dight found that the factual context of a case would inform the extent of the duty imposed by COBS 2.1.1R. HHJ Dight said at para 148:

"In my judgment in order to identify the extent of the duty imposed by Rule 2.1.1 one has to identify the relevant factual context, because it is apparent from the submissions of each of the parties that the context has an impact on the ascertainment of the extent of the duty. The key fact, perhaps composite fact, in the context is the agreement into which the parties entered, which defined their roles and functions in the transaction."

I note that there are significant differences between the breaches of COBS 2.1.1R alleged by Mr Adams and the issues in Mr M's complaint. The breaches were summarised in paragraph 120 of the Court of Appeal judgment. In particular, HHJ Dight considered the contractual relationship between the parties in the context of Mr Adams' pleaded breaches of COBS 2.1.1R that happened *after* the contract was entered into. And he wasn't asked to consider the question of due diligence *before* Options SIPP agreed to accept the Storepods investment into its SIPP.

In Mr M's complaint, amongst other things, I'm considering whether Options ought to have identified that the Store First investment involved a significant risk of consumer detriment

and, if so, whether it ought to have declined to accept applications to invest in Store First *before* it received Mr M's application. And the same applied to Options deciding whether to accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd.

The facts of Mr Adams' and Mr M's cases are also different. I make that point to highlight that there are factual differences between *Adams v Options SIPP* and Mr M's case. And I need to construe the duties Options owed to Mr M under COBS 2.1.1R in light of the specific facts of Mr M's case.

So, I've considered COBS 2.1.1R – alongside the remainder of the relevant considerations, and within the factual context of Mr M's case, including Options role in the transaction.

However, I think it's important to emphasise that I must determine this complaint by reference to what is, in my opinion, fair and reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. And, in doing that, I'm required to take into account relevant considerations which include 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 relevant time. This is a clear and relevant point of difference between this complaint and the judgments in *Adams v Options SIPP*. That was a legal claim which was defined by the formal pleadings in Mr Adams' statement of case.

I also want to emphasise that I don't say that Options was under any obligation to advise Mr M on the SIPP and/or the underlying investments. Refusing to accept an application isn't the same thing as advising Mr M on the merits of the SIPP and/or the underlying investments.

Overall, I'm satisfied that COBS 2.1.1R is a relevant consideration – but that it needs to be considered alongside the remainder of the relevant considerations, and within the factual context of Mr M's case.

Options has pointed out that a contravention of the Principles cannot in itself give rise to any cause of action at law. That may be true. However, I am dealing with a complaint, not a cause of action, and what I am seeking to identify here is what is relevant to my consideration of what is fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this case. And I'm satisfied that the FCA's Principles are a relevant consideration that I must take into account when deciding this complaint.

Regulatory publications

The FCA (and its predecessor, the FSA) has issued a number of publications which remind SIPP operators of their obligations and set out how they might achieve the outcomes envisaged by the Principles, namely:

- The 2009 and 2012 thematic review reports.
- The October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance.
- The July 2014 "Dear CEO" letter.

I've considered the relevance of these publications. And I've set out material parts of the publications here, although I've considered them in their entirety.

The 2009 Thematic Review Report

The 2009 report included the following statement:

“We are very clear that SIPP operators, regardless of whether they provide advice, are bound by Principle 6 of the Principles for Businesses (‘a firm must pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly’) insofar as they are obliged to ensure the fair treatment of their customers. COBS 3.2.3(2) states that a member of a pension scheme is a ‘client’ for COBS purposes, and ‘Customer’ in terms of Principle 6 includes clients.

It is the responsibility of SIPP operators to continuously analyse the individual risks to themselves and their clients, with reference to the six TCF consumer outcomes ...

We agree that firms acting purely as SIPP operators are not responsible for the SIPP advice given by third parties such as IFAs. However, we are also clear that SIPP operators cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility, and we would expect them to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs. Such instances could then be addressed in an appropriate way, for example by contacting the member to confirm the position, or by contacting the firm giving advice and asking for clarification. Moreover, while they are not responsible for the advice, there is a reputational risk to SIPP operators that facilitate SIPPs that are unsuitable or detrimental to clients.

Of particular concern were firms whose systems and controls were weak and inadequate to the extent that they had not identified obvious potential instances of poor advice and/or potential financial crime. Depending on the facts and circumstances of individual cases, we may take enforcement action against SIPP operators who do not safeguard their customers’ interests in this respect, with reference to Principle 3 of the Principles for Businesses (‘a firm must take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively, with adequate risk management systems’).

The following are examples of measures that SIPP operators could consider, taken from examples of good practice that we observed and suggestions we have made to firms:

- Confirming, both initially and on an ongoing basis, that intermediaries that advise clients are authorised and regulated by the FSA, that they have the appropriate permissions to give the advice they are providing to the firm’s clients, and that they do not appear on the FSA website listing warning notices.*
- Having Terms of Business agreements governing relationships, and clarifying respective responsibilities, with intermediaries introducing SIPP business.*
- Routinely recording and reviewing the type (i.e. the nature of the SIPP investment) and size of investments recommended by intermediaries that give advice and introduce clients to the firm, so that potentially unsuitable SIPPs can be identified.*
- Being able to identify anomalous investments, e.g. unusually small or large transactions or more ‘esoteric’ investments such as unquoted shares, together with the intermediary that introduced the business. This would enable the firm to seek appropriate clarification, e.g. from the client or their adviser, if it is concerned about the suitability of what was recommended.*
- Requesting copies of the suitability reports provided to clients by the intermediary giving advice. While SIPP operators are not responsible for advice, having this information would enhance the firm’s understanding of its clients, making the facilitation of unsuitable SIPPs less likely.*

- *Routinely identifying instances of execution-only clients who have signed disclaimers taking responsibility for their investment decisions, and gathering and analysing data regarding the aggregate volume of such business.*
- *Identifying instances of clients waiving their cancellation rights, and the reasons for this.*

The later publications

In the October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance, the FCA states:

“This guide, originally published in September 2009, has been updated to give firms further guidance to help meet the regulatory requirements. These are not new or amended requirements, but a reminder of regulatory responsibilities that became a requirement in April 2007.

All firms, regardless of whether they do or do not provide advice must meet Principle 6 and treat customers fairly. COBS 3.2.3(2) is clear that a member of a pension scheme is a “client” for SIPP operators and so is a customer under Principle 6. It is a SIPP operator’s responsibility to assess its business with reference to our six TCF consumer outcomes: ...”

The October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance also set out the following:

“Relationships between firms that advise and introduce prospective members and SIPP operators

Examples of good practice we observed during our work with SIPP operators include the following:

- *Confirming, both initially and on an ongoing basis, that: introducers that advise clients are authorised and regulated by the FCA; that they have the appropriate permissions to give the advice they are providing; neither the firm, nor its approved persons are on the list of prohibited individuals or cancelled firms and have a clear disciplinary history; and that the firm does not appear on the FCA website listings for unauthorised business warnings.*
- *Having terms of business agreements that govern relationships and clarify the responsibilities of those introducers providing SIPP business to a firm.*
- *Understanding the nature of the introducers’ work to establish the nature of the firm, what their business objectives are, the types of clients they deal with, the levels of business they conduct and expect to introduce, the types of investments they recommend and whether they use other SIPP operators. Being satisfied that they are appropriate to deal with.*
- *Being able to identify irregular investments, often indicated by unusually small or large transactions; or higher risk investments such as unquoted shares which may be illiquid. This would enable the firm to seek appropriate clarification, for example from the prospective member or their adviser, if it has any concerns.*
- *Identifying instances when prospective members waive their cancellation rights and the reasons for this.*

- *Although the members' advisers are responsible for the SIPP investment advice given, as a SIPP operator the firm has a responsibility for the quality of the SIPP business it administers.*

Examples of good practice we have identified include:

- *conducting independent verification checks on members to ensure the information they are being supplied with, or that they are providing the firm with, is authentic and meets the firm's procedures and are not being used to launder money*
- *having clear terms of business agreements in place which govern relationships and clarify responsibilities for relationships with other professional bodies such as solicitors and accountants, and*
- *using non-regulated introducer checklists which demonstrate the SIPP operators have considered the additional risks involved in accepting business from nonregulated introducers"*

In relation to due diligence the October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance said:

"Due diligence

Principle 2 of the FCA's Principles for Businesses requires all firms to conduct their business with due skill, care and diligence. All firms should ensure that they conduct and retain appropriate and sufficient due diligence (for example, checking and monitoring introducers as well as assessing that investments are appropriate for personal pension schemes) to help them justify their business decisions. In doing this SIPP operators should consider:

- *ensuring that all investments permitted by the scheme are permitted by HMRC, or where a tax charge is incurred, that charge is identifiable, HMRC is informed and the tax charge paid*
- *periodically reviewing the due diligence the firm undertakes in respect of the introducers that use their scheme and, where appropriate enhancing the processes that are in place in order to identify and mitigate any risks to the members and the scheme*
- *having checks which may include, but are not limited to:*
 - *ensuring that introducers have the appropriate permissions, qualifications and skills to introduce different types of business to the firm, and*
 - *undertaking additional checks such as viewing Companies House records, identifying connected parties and visiting introducers*
- *ensuring all third-party due diligence that the firm uses or relies on has been independently produced and verified*
- *good practices we have identified in firms include having a set of benchmarks, or minimum standards, with the purpose of setting the minimum standard the firm is prepared to accept to either deal with introducers or accept investments, and*

- *ensuring these benchmarks clearly identify those instances that would lead a firm to decline the proposed business, or to undertake further investigations such as instances of potential pension liberation, investments that may breach HMRC tax relievables investments and non-standard investments that have not been approved by the firm*

The July 2014 “Dear CEO” letter provides a further reminder that the Principles apply and an indication of the FCA’s expectations about the kinds of practical steps a SIPP operator might reasonably take to achieve the outcomes envisaged by the Principles.

The “Dear CEO” letter also sets out how a SIPP operator might meet its obligations in relation to investment due diligence. It says those obligations could be met by:

- Correctly establishing and understanding the nature of an investment
- Ensuring that an investment is genuine and not a scam, or linked to fraudulent activity, money-laundering or pensions liberation
- Ensuring that an investment is safe/secure (meaning that custody of assets is through a reputable arrangement, and any contractual agreements are correctly drawn-up and legally enforceable)
- Ensuring that an investment can be independently valued, both at point of purchase and subsequently
- Ensuring that an investment is not impaired (for example that previous investors have received income if expected, or that any investment providers are credit worthy etc)

Although I’ve referred to selected parts of the publications, to illustrate their relevance, I have considered them in their entirety.

I acknowledge that the 2009 and 2012 reports and the “Dear CEO” letter are not formal “guidance” (whereas the 2013 finalised guidance is). However, the fact that the reports and “Dear CEO” letter did not constitute formal guidance does not mean their importance should be underestimated. They provide a reminder that the Principles for Businesses apply and are an indication of the kinds of things a SIPP operator might do to ensure it is treating its customers fairly and produce the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. In that respect the publications, which set out the regulator’s expectations of what SIPP operators should be doing, also goes some way to indicate what I consider amounts to good industry practice and I am, therefore, satisfied it is appropriate to take them into account.

It is relevant that when deciding what amounted to good industry practice in the BBSAL case, the Ombudsman found that *“the regulator’s reports, guidance and letter go a long way to clarify what should be regarded as good practice and what should not.”* And the judge in BBSAL endorsed the lawfulness of the approach taken by the Ombudsman.

At its introduction the 2009 Thematic Review Report says:

“In this report, we describe the findings of this thematic review, and make clear what we expect of SIPP operator firms in the areas we reviewed. It also provides examples of good practices we found.”

And, as referenced above, the report goes on to provide *“...examples of measures that SIPP operators could consider, taken from examples of good practice that we observed and suggestions we have made to firms.”*

So, I'm satisfied that the 2009 Report is a *reminder* that the Principles apply and it gives an indication of the kinds of things a SIPP operator might do to ensure it is treating its customers fairly and produce the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. The Report set out the regulator's expectations of what SIPP operators should be doing and therefore indicates what I consider amounts to good industry practice at the relevant time. So, I'm satisfied it's relevant and therefore appropriate to take it into account.

Options has argued that many of the matters which the Report invites firms to consider are directed at firms providing advisory services. But to be clear, I think the Report is also directed at firms like Options acting purely as SIPP operators. The Report says that *"We are very clear that SIPP operators, regardless of whether they provide advice, are bound by Principle 6 of the Principles for Businesses..."* And it's noted prior to the good practice examples quoted above that *"We agree that firms acting purely as SIPP operators are not responsible for the SIPP advice given by third parties such as IFAs. However, we are also clear that SIPP operators cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility, and we would expect them to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs."*

The remainder of the publications also provide a *reminder* that the Principles for Businesses apply and are an indication of the kinds of things a SIPP operator might do to ensure it is treating its customers fairly and to produce the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. In that respect, these publications also go some way to indicate what I consider amounts to good industry practice at the relevant time. I therefore remain satisfied it's appropriate to take them into account too.

Like the Ombudsman in the BBSAL case, I do not think the fact that some of the publications (except for the 2009 Thematic Review Report) post-date the events that took place in relation to Mr M's complaint, means that the examples of good practice they provide were not good practice at the time of the relevant events. Although the later publications were published after the events subject to this complaint, the Principles that underpin them existed throughout, as did the obligation to act in accordance with the Principles.

It is also clear from the text of the 2009 and 2012 Thematic Review Reports (and the "Dear CEO" letter in 2014) that the regulator expected SIPP operators to have incorporated the recommended good practices into the conduct of their business already. So, whilst the regulator's comments suggest some industry participants' understanding of how the good practice standards shaped what was expected of SIPP operators changed over time, it is clear the standards themselves had not changed.

I note that HHJ Dight in the *Adams* case didn't consider the 2012 Thematic Review Report, 2013 SIPP operator guidance and 2014 "Dear CEO" letter to be of relevance to his consideration of Mr Adams' claim. But it does not follow that those publications are irrelevant to my consideration of what is fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this complaint. I am required to take into account good industry practice at the relevant time. And, as mentioned, the publications indicate what I consider amounts to good industry practice at the relevant time.

That doesn't mean that, in considering what is fair and reasonable, I will only consider Options' actions with these documents in mind. The reports, Dear CEO letter and guidance gave non-exhaustive examples of good industry practice. They did not say the suggestions given were the limit of what a SIPP operator should do. As the annex to the "Dear CEO" letter notes, what should be done to meet regulatory obligations will depend on the circumstances.

The 2013 alert

The regulator also issued an alert in January 2013 about advisers giving advice to consumers on SIPP's without consideration of the underlying investment to be held in the SIPP. The alert (*"Advising on pension transfers with a view to investing pension monies into unregulated products through a SIPP"*) set out that this type of restricted advice didn't meet regulatory requirements. It said:

"It has been brought to the FSA's attention that some financial advisers are giving advice to customers on pension transfers or pension switches without assessing the advantages and disadvantages of investments proposed to be held within the new pension. In particular, we have seen financial advisers moving customers' retirement savings to self-invested personal pensions (SIPPs) that invest wholly or primarily in high risk, often highly illiquid unregulated investments (some which may be in Unregulated Collective Investment Schemes). Examples of the unregulated investments are diamonds, overseas property developments, storepods, forestry and film schemes, among other non-mainstream propositions.

The cases we have seen tend to operate under a similar advice model. An introducer will pass customer details to an unregulated firm, which markets an unregulated investment (eg an overseas property development). When the customer expresses an interest in the unregulated investment, the customer is introduced to a regulated financial adviser to provide advice on the unregulated investment. The financial adviser does not give advice on the unregulated investments and says it is only providing advice on a SIPP capable of holding the unregulated investment ...

Financial advisers using this advice model are under the mistaken impression that this process means they do not have to consider the unregulated investment as part of their advice to invest in the SIPP and that they only need to consider the suitability of the SIPP in the abstract. This is incorrect.

The FSA's view is that the provision of suitable advice generally requires consideration of the other investments held by the customer or, when advice is given on a product which is a vehicle for investment in other products (such as SIPPs and other wrappers), consideration of the suitability of the overall proposition, that is, the wrapper and the expected underlying investments in unregulated schemes ..."

The alert came shortly after the events in this complaint – but, again, it didn't set new standards. It highlighted that advisers using the restricted advice model discussed in the alert generally weren't meeting *existing* regulatory requirements and set out the regulator's concerns about industry practices at the time.

To be clear, I do not say the Principles or the publications obliged Options to ensure the transaction were suitable for Mr M. It is accepted Options was not required to give advice to Mr M, and could not give advice. And I accept the publications do not alter the meaning of, or the scope of, the Principles. But, as I've said above, they're evidence of what I consider to have been good industry practice at the relevant time, which would bring about the outcomes envisaged by the Principles. As Options has noted from the FCA's Enforcement Guide, publications of this type "*illustrate ways (but not the only ways) in which a person can comply with the relevant rules*". And so, it's fair and reasonable for me to take them into account when deciding this complaint.

Options has previously argued that any publications or guidance that post-dated the events subject of this complaint don't help to clarify the type of good industry practice that existed at the relevant time. But that doesn't alter my view on what I consider to have been good

industry practice at the time. That's because I find that the 2009 Report together with the Principles provide a very clear indication of what Options could and should have done to comply with its regulatory obligations that existed at the relevant time before accepting Mr M's application.

It's important to keep in mind the judge in *Adams v Options* didn't consider the regulatory publications in the context of considering what's fair and reasonable in all the circumstances bearing in mind various matters including the Principles (as part of the regulator's rules) or good industry practice.

And in determining this complaint, I need to consider whether, in accepting Mr M's application to establish a SIPP and to invest in Store First, Options complied with its regulatory obligations: to act with due skill, care and diligence; to take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively; to pay due regard to the interests of its customers and treat them fairly; and to act honestly, fairly and professionally. In doing that, I'm looking to the Principles and the publications listed above to provide an indication of what Options should have done to comply with its regulatory obligations and duties.

Taking account of the factual context of this case, it's my view that in order for Options to meet its regulatory obligations, (under the Principles and COBS 2.1.1R), amongst other things it should have undertaken sufficient due diligence into Douglas Baillie Ltd/the business Douglas Baillie Ltd was introducing and the Store First investment *before* deciding to accept Mr M's application.

Options says it is being held liable because it is the only remaining regulated entity over which the Financial Ombudsman Service has jurisdiction. But ultimately, what I'll be looking at here is whether Options took reasonable care, acted with due diligence and treated Mr M fairly, in accordance with his best interests. And what I think is fair and reasonable in light of that. And I think the key issue in Mr M's complaint is whether it was fair and reasonable for Options to have accepted his SIPP application and Store First investment application in the first place. So, I need to consider whether Options carried out appropriate due diligence checks on Douglas Baillie Ltd and the Store First investment before deciding to accept Mr M's application.

And the questions I need to consider include whether Options ought to, acting fairly and reasonably to meet its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, have identified that consumers introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or investing in Store First were being put at significant risk of detriment. And, if so, whether Options should therefore not have accepted Mr M's application for the Options SIPP and/or the Store First investments.

The contract between Options and Mr M

In other, similar, cases, Options has made submissions about its contract with clients like Mr M, and I've carefully considered everything Options has said about this.

I acknowledge that Options says that, at the time of the transaction, there was nothing in the DISP rules preventing SIPP providers accepting business from execution-only customers or high-risk business.

For clarity, my decision is made on the understanding that Options acted purely as a SIPP operator. I don't say Options should (or could) have given advice to Mr M or otherwise have ensured the suitability of the SIPP or the Store First investment for him. I accept that Options made it clear to Mr M that it wasn't giving, nor was it able to give, advice and that it played an execution-only role in his SIPP investments. And that forms, which Mr M signed,

confirmed, amongst other things, that losses arising as a result of Options acting on his instructions were his responsibility.

I've not overlooked or discounted the basis on which Options was appointed. And my decision on what's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of Mr M's case is made with all of this in mind. So, I've proceeded on the understanding that Options wasn't obliged – and wasn't able – to give advice to Mr M on the suitability of the SIPP or the Store First investment.

Options' due diligence on introducing adviser Douglas Baillie Ltd

Options had a duty to conduct due diligence and give thought to whether to accept introductions from TPS as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd.

In this and other complaints, in which Options said clients were introduced to Options by Douglas Baillie Ltd, an FCA regulated adviser at the relevant time, Options provided us with a printout from the FCA Register dated 28 December 2011 showing "*Basic details*" for "*The Pension Specialist LLP*". This said its current status was "*Appointed Representative*" effective from 24 May 2011. This printout also showed a list of four individuals involved with "*The Pension Specialist LLP*". Options has not provided any evidence of the FCA Register searches it completed in relation to Douglas Baillie Ltd or what permissions Douglas Baillie Ltd held.

Options also told us that clients had opted to use Douglas Baillie Ltd as the introducer and Options received a letter of authority to this effect, alongside the SIPP application. That Options satisfied itself that the letter of authority related to the same Douglas Baillie Ltd it had carried out due diligence on. That as far as Options was aware, the client never had any communication with CL&P, and Options had documents to suggest Douglas Baillie Ltd was the sole introducer and adviser. And had the client not first received regulated financial advice, Options would not have accepted the transfer and the client would not have made the investments.

Also, in this and other complaints, Options provided the Financial Ombudsman with a copy of the Introducer Profile and Introducer Agreement between Options and "*The Pension Specialist LLP*" as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd, signed on 10 October 2011.

Amongst other things, the Introducer Agreement says TPS is responsible for the following:

- Under the "*Providing Advice*" section:
 - "*To evaluate your client's financial circumstances and based on this assess their suitability for what, if any, of the [Options] Pension range is appropriate;*"
 - "*Where a transfer is recommended, all options considered and the advice provided to the client in line with regulatory requirements;*"
- Under the "*Scheme Investments*" section:
 - "*Where your client seeks advice, to provide fully documented advice to your client on the suitability of the Scheme investments, taking account of their financial objectives and attitude to investment risk;*"
 - "*To ensure you have the correct FSA authorisation to provide the investment advice;*"

In other complaints, Options has also provided evidence of some of the discussions it had with TPS, as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd, about the client process and the business it was referring.

From the information that Options has provided about its relationship with TPS, I'm satisfied Options did take *some* steps towards meeting its regulatory obligations and good industry practice. However, I don't think those steps the Financial Ombudsman has seen evidence of went far enough or were sufficient to meet Options' regulatory obligations and standards of good industry practice.

I think Options was aware of, or should have identified potential risks of, consumer detriment associated with business introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd, including the following, before it accepted Mr M's application:

- The SIPP business introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd had anomalous features – it appears to have been high risk business, including many defined benefit scheme transfers where monies were ending up invested in unregulated and esoteric investments post-transfer.
- Neither TPS nor any other regulated party was offering the consumers being introduced full regulated advice (that is advice on the transfer or switch to the SIPP, the establishment of the SIPP and the intended investment(s)). Instead, advice was being restricted and advice was not being offered on the suitability of the intended investment(s).
- The risk of an unregulated business being involved in the transfer and investment process.

I've set out below some more detail on anomalous features of the business Douglas Baillie Ltd was introducing to Options, and on potential risks of consumer detriment that I think Options either knew about, or ought to have known about, *before* it accepted Mr M's SIPP application. These points overlap, to a degree, and should have been considered by Options cumulatively.

Anomalous features

The type of investments being made by Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers

Options has told us that Douglas Baillie Ltd introduced 59 clients to Options. And that the majority of clients introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd invested in either Store First and/or GAS Verdant Australian Farmland (an unregulated investment which took the form of a 'land purchase contract' involving a company based in Cyprus which leased plots of agricultural land in Australia to investors), with the remainder invested in Central and South American forestry investments.

Given this, and based on the evidence I've seen to date, I think it's more likely than not that either all, or the vast majority of, clients introduced to Options by Douglas Baillie Ltd ended up with SIPP monies invested in higher risk non-standard assets.

I think it's fair to say that such investments are highly unlikely to be suitable for the vast majority of retail clients. They will generally only be suitable for a small proportion of people investing for their pension. And I think Options either was aware, or ought reasonably to have been aware, that the type of business Douglas Baillie Ltd was introducing was high risk and therefore carried a potential risk of consumer detriment.

From similar complaints about Options brought to the Financial Ombudsman which feature Douglas Baillie Ltd as the advising introducer, I've seen that many of the client SIPP application forms Douglas Baillie Ltd sent to Options didn't include any details about the intended investment(s). Mr M's SIPP application was one such.

And I note Options has told us that it acts as the administrator only of the SIPP, and clients opened their SIPP and did not specify in their SIPP application what investments they were interested in. So, Options may argue it didn't know what Mr M and other Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced clients were investing in.

But while the 2009 Thematic Review Report made clear that firms acting purely as SIPP operators are not responsible for the SIPP advice given by third parties such as IFAs, it also made clear that *"SIPP operators cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility, and we would expect them to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs."*

And the 2009 Thematic Review Report went on to give the following as examples of measures that SIPP operators could consider, taken from examples of good practice that the regulator had observed and suggestions it had made to firms:

"Routinely recording and reviewing the type (i.e. the nature of the SIPP investment) and size of investments recommended by intermediaries that give advice and introduce clients to the firm, so that potentially unsuitable SIPPs can be identified."

"Being able to identify anomalous investments, e.g. unusually small or large transactions or more 'esoteric' investments such as unquoted shares, together with the intermediary that introduced the business. This would enable the firm to seek appropriate clarification, e.g. from the client or their adviser, if it is concerned about the suitability of what was recommended."

So, even if the investments weren't recorded on the application form, Options knew or should have known the investments that were typically being made by Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced clients.

Volume and nature of business introduced

As I say, an example of good practice identified in the FSA's 2009 Thematic Review Report was:

"Routinely recording and reviewing the type (i.e. the nature of the SIPP investment) and size of investments recommended by intermediaries that give advice and introduce clients to the firm, so that potentially unsuitable SIPPs can be identified."

Options has told us that Douglas Baillie Ltd made its first introduction to Options on 12 December 2011 and the last on 4 October 2012. That Douglas Baillie Ltd introduced a total of 59 clients to Options, and the number of those that were introduced before one particular client. That Options recorded all commission paid to Douglas Baillie Ltd, and that commission was based on the transfer value with the average commission being 2.11%. And that the majority of clients introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd invested in either Store First and/or GAS Verdant, with the remainder invested in Central and South American forestry investments. Based on this, I'm satisfied Options had access to information about the number and type of introductions that Douglas Baillie Ltd made.

I'm also satisfied Options was aware that Douglas Baillie Ltd was only advising on the transfer, and not the investments. I say this because on 16 March 2012, Ms H at Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to detail that her understanding of the agreed process included that TPS would only advise on the transfer (I've reproduced the relevant parts of this email above).

Further, the advice letter that Douglas Baillie Ltd prepared in relation to Mr M, and Mr M's SIPP application, which Douglas Baillie Ltd sent to Options in June 2012, make it clear Douglas Baillie Ltd was only advising on the transfer, and not the investments. The letter said, "*we have not been asked to advise you on the investment of the funds held within your SIPP, we will simply arrange for the funds to be transferred to the [SIPP]*". And the 'Transfers' section of the SIPP application contained a ticked box which read "*Please tick the box to indicate that you have received advice on the transfer of this policy*" and confirmed that "*Douglas Baillie Ltd*" had provided Mr M "...with advice in respect of this transfer." And the later 'Financial Adviser Details' section of the SIPP application form again sets out Douglas Baillie Ltd's details and says "*Please note our fee is for advice on transfer only. No advice has been given by us on investment.*"

So, Mr M's advice letter and SIPP application made clear that advice had only been given in relation to the transfer and not in relation to any intended investments. And I've seen that this was also the case with the SIPP application forms in other similar complaints about Options brought to the Financial Ombudsman which feature Douglas Baillie Ltd as the advising introducer.

Based on all this, I think Options was on notice from the point in time it first started receiving SIPP application forms from Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers that Douglas Baillie Ltd had not given consumers *any* advice on Store First, GAS Verdant and other higher risk non-standard asset investments.

Options says Douglas Baillie Ltd was an FCA regulated business and at the time of the client's SIPP application, Options was not aware of any reason it shouldn't accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd. But I think that from very early on Options was aware, or ought to have been aware, that TPS (as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd) wasn't a firm that was doing things in a conventional way.

It's unusual for regulated advice firms to be involved in transactions involving pension transfers to invest in high risk esoteric investments, such as the Store First and GAS Verdant investments, where no advice is being given by that firm on the esoteric investments. That's because the risks involved in such investments are unlikely to be fully understood by most people, without obtaining regulated advice. I think it's fair to say that most advice firms decline to be involved in such transactions.

I think this ought to have been a red flag for Options in its dealings with Douglas Baillie Ltd. And I think Options ought to have recognised there was a risk that Douglas Baillie Ltd might be *choosing* to introduce consumers without them having been offered regulated advice by Douglas Baillie Ltd on the unregulated investments that their transfers to Options were intended for. I think Options ought to have viewed this as a serious cause for concern – this was a clear and obvious potential risk of consumer detriment in this case.

And I think this concern ought to have been even greater in a case like Mr M's where a DB scheme was involved. At the relevant date COBS 19.1.6G stated:

"When advising a retail client who is, or is eligible to be, a member of a defined benefits occupational pension scheme whether to transfer or opt-out, a firm should start by assuming that a transfer or opt-out will not be suitable. A firm should only

then consider a transfer or opt-out to be suitable if it can clearly demonstrate, on contemporary evidence, that the transfer or opt-out is in the client's best interests".

While I acknowledge this aims to define the expectation of a regulated financial adviser when determining the suitability of a pension transfer, it emphasises the regulator's concern about the potential detriment such a transaction could expose a consumer to. Given the nature of its business and regulatory status, I'd expect Options to have been familiar with the guidance contained in COBS – even if it didn't apply directly to it. This was a further clear and obvious potential risk of consumer detriment.

Further, the advice letter Douglas Baillie Ltd prepared for Mr M made clear it had not been provided with a "*financial planning profiler*" for Mr M so did not have knowledge on his personal circumstances. This, I think, is something Options ought to have been concerned by, not least because the terms of business between Douglas Baillie Ltd and Options expected TPS to "*evaluate [the] client's financial circumstances*" as part of the advice process. I think the advice letter, which Options received a copy of alongside the application, made it clear this hadn't happened in Mr M's case.

The risk of an unregulated business being involved

In many similar cases where Douglas Baillie Ltd introduced the business to Options, Options says it has no record of CL&P being involved. However, CL&P was an introducer of business to Options, and Options has made submissions to us in relation to the checks it made on World Check and the FSA notice regarding Mr Wright. I've considered all this carefully, but I see no need to address these submissions in Mr M's case. Because the due diligence Options may or may not have carried out on CL&P before accepting introductions from it isn't the basis on which I'm upholding Mr M's complaint, or something I've relied on in reaching my conclusions.

As I've mentioned above, from the point in time it first started receiving SIPP application forms from Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers, I think Options was on notice that Douglas Baillie Ltd had not given consumers any advice on the intended investments.

Having carefully considered the available evidence, including the SIPP application forms I've seen in this and other complaints against Options where Douglas Baillie Ltd was the introducing adviser, I think it's more likely than not that most, if not all, Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced Options consumers were doing the same thing. By which I mean that application forms to establish an Options SIPP were being submitted for Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced Options consumers recording that advice had been given by Douglas Baillie Ltd on the transfer but not on the investments, that pension monies were then being transferred into the newly established Options SIPPs for those consumers, and, subsequently, the consumers' SIPP monies were being invested in Store First, GAS Verdant and other high risk non-standard investments.

To be clear, I don't think it's credible that most, or all, of these Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced consumers were *independently* determining to invest their pension monies in Store First, GAS Verdant and other high risk non-standard investments without any input from a third party. Given what Options ought reasonably to have identified about the business it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd had it undertaken adequate due diligence, I think this should have been a significant cause for concern for Options and caused it to consider the business it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd very carefully.

I think that Options ought to have been alive to the risk that an unregulated third party might have been involved in promoting the investments to investors, like Mr M, and that consumers were not receiving any regulated advice from Douglas Baillie Ltd on the investments.

I acknowledge that Options says there was nothing in the DISP rules preventing SIPP providers from accepting business from unregulated introducers. But by 25 May 2012, *before* Mr M's application was introduced to Options (his application was received by Options in June 2012), Options had itself chosen to terminate the introducer agreement it had with CL&P, over the concerns Options had about how CL&P operated. Yet two months later, CL&P was in direct contact with Options regarding Douglas Baillie Ltd-introduced clients - CL&P emailed Options directly on 25 July 2012 to say that TPS (as an appointed representative of Douglas Baillie Ltd) was preparing a TVAS for a client and to ask Options to send the client's discharge papers to TPS. The same day, a Pensions Administrator at Options replied to CL&P to confirm Options had done this.

As I've said, Options was obliged to conduct its business with due skill, care and diligence, and to take reasonable care to organise and control its affairs responsibly and effectively, with adequate risk management systems. And I'm mindful that the regulator's 2009 Thematic Review Report said that *"It is the responsibility of SIPP operators to continuously analyse the individual risks to themselves and their clients, with reference to the six TCF consumer outcomes."* Given all this, I think Options should have been aware and concerned that CL&P was still actively involved in the transfer for a client that Douglas Baillie Ltd had introduced to Options, after Options itself had decided its concerns about how CL&P operated were too great for Options to continue accepting introductions from CL&P.

And it ought to have been concerned that CL&P, or another unregulated entity, might have promoted the Store First investment to Mr M, or even advised him on the investment. I note that Mr M confirmed in the Member Declaration and Indemnity that he had taken his own advice including *"investment and tax advice regarding the investment and its value, taxes, costs and fees"*. Given Douglas Baillie Ltd weren't advising on the investment, this suggests the involvement of someone other than Douglas Baillie Ltd.

What fair and reasonable steps should Options have taken, in the circumstances?

Options could simply have concluded that given the potential risks of consumer detriment – which I think were clear and obvious at the time – it should not accept applications from Douglas Baillie Ltd. That would have been a fair and reasonable step to take, in the circumstances. Alternatively, Options could have taken fair and reasonable steps to address the potential risks of consumer detriment.

Requesting information directly from Douglas Baillie Ltd

Given the significant potential risk of consumer detriment I think that, as part of its due diligence on Douglas Baillie Ltd, Options ought to have found out more about how Douglas Baillie Ltd was operating and *before* it accepted Mr M's application. Mindful of the type of introductions I think it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd, and that the clients introduced were not receiving regulated advice on the intended investments, I think it's fair and reasonable to expect Options, in line with its regulatory obligations, to have made some very specific enquiries and obtained information about Douglas Baillie Ltd's business model.

As set out above, the 2009 Thematic Review Report explained that the regulator would expect SIPP operators to have procedures and controls, and for management information to be gathered and analysed, so as to enable the identification of, amongst other things, *"consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs"*. Further, that this could then be addressed in an appropriate way *"...for example by contacting the members to confirm the position, or by contacting the firm giving advice and asking for clarification."*

The October 2013 finalised SIPP operator guidance gave an example of good practice as:

“Understanding the nature of the introducers’ work to establish the nature of the firm, what their business objectives are, the types of clients they deal with, the levels of business they conduct and expect to introduce, the types of investments they recommend and whether they use other SIPP operators. Being satisfied that they are appropriate to deal with.”

I think that Options, and *before* it received Mr M’s application from Douglas Baillie Ltd in June 2012, should have checked with Douglas Baillie Ltd about: how it came into contact with potential clients, what agreements it had in place with its clients, whether all of the clients it was introducing were being offered full advice, what its arrangements with any unregulated businesses were, how and why retail clients were interested in making higher risk non-standard investments, whether it was aware of anyone else providing information to clients, how it was able to meet with or speak with all its clients, and what material was being provided to clients by it.

I think obtaining this *type* of information from Douglas Baillie Ltd was a fair and reasonable step for Options to take, in the circumstances, to meet its regulatory obligations and good industry practice.

And, on balance, I think it’s more likely than not that if Options *had* checked with Douglas Baillie Ltd and asked the *type* of questions I’ve mentioned above that Douglas Baillie Ltd would have provided the information sought.

I say this because Douglas Baillie Ltd’s email to Options on 18 May 2012 shows that Douglas Baillie Ltd and Options had some discussion in relation to firms Options had refused business from, and Douglas Baillie Ltd was willing to discuss that further – Douglas Baillie Ltd said, *“[TPS Director] mentioned that there were a couple of accounts that you have refused business from, as I tend to be closer to the accounts, can you confirm who they are please. This way, I can ensure that [TPS office] are aware of any blacklisted firms and that we can avoid them as well.”*

But based on the evidence provided to the Financial Ombudsman, it wasn’t until almost a year after an Introducer Profile and an Introducer Agreement between Options and Douglas Baillie Ltd was signed that Options asked Douglas Baillie Ltd about how it came into contact with potential clients. On 4 September 2012, Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say *“... it would be helpful for me to understand where you are currently getting the introductions from for the transfer work can you please provide me a list of introducers that you are currently doing transfer advice for to assist me to consider further.”*

Then on 6 October 2012, some months after Options had accepted Mr M’s SIPP application, Options emailed Douglas Baillie Ltd to say, *“...we need to know on the form who the introducer of the business is to you, I advised you that we had de-listed CLP and would not deal with them but we have some information from a member of your team who said in passing to a member of my team when we were asking about the investments they wanted to transact, that they would check with CLP. If you are sending us business that has been introduced by CLP please stop, we do not want to be associated with them as an introducing firm of business to us as we as I [sic] have said to you before that they offer incentives to the client for transacting the transfer and I understood that you too had concerns, is there any reason why you are still transacting business with them.”*

So, Options, and *before* it received Mr M’s application from Douglas Baillie Ltd, should have decided not to accept business from Douglas Baillie Ltd, given that Options had decided not to accept new business from CL&P.

Making independent checks

I think, in light of what I've said above, it would also have been fair and reasonable for Options, to meet its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, to have taken independent steps to enhance its understanding of the introductions it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd. For example, it could have asked for copies of correspondence relating to the transfer advice.

The 2009 Thematic Review Report said that:

*"...we would expect (SIPP operators) to have procedures and controls, and to be gathering and analysing management information, enabling them to identify possible instances of financial crime and consumer detriment such as unsuitable SIPPs. Such instances could then be addressed in an appropriate way, **for example by contacting the members to confirm the position, or by contacting the firm giving advice and asking for clarification.**"* (bold my emphasis)

So, I think it would have been fair and reasonable for Options to speak to some applicants, like Mr M, directly.

I accept Options couldn't give advice. But it had to take reasonable steps to meet its regulatory obligations. And in my view such steps included addressing a potential risk of consumer detriment by speaking to applicants, as this could have provided Options with further insight into Douglas Baillie Ltd's business model. This would have been a fair and reasonable step to take in reaction to the clear and obvious risks of consumer detriment I've mentioned.

And, on balance, I think it's more likely than not that if Options *had* contacted Mr M to 'confirm the position', Mr M would, with the events fresh in his mind unlike now, have told Options that he'd been contacted by telephone by someone asking about his pension (probably a representative of CL&P), and then referred on to Douglas Baillie Ltd. And that the person, or people, he'd spoken with had introduced him to the idea, and persuaded him of the benefits, of transferring his existing pension to a SIPP and investing in Store First. I think it's likely Options would also have become aware that Mr M wasn't an experienced investor and didn't understand the investment was high risk (I'll say more about what I think about Mr M's understanding of the risks below). And as I've said, by the time Options received Mr M's SIPP application, CL&P was a business that Options had already terminated its introducer agreement with over concerns about how CL&P operated.

Had it taken these fair and reasonable steps, what should Options have concluded?

If Options had undertaken these steps I think it ought to have identified, amongst others, the following risks before it accepted Mr M's application and investment instructions:

- Douglas Baillie Ltd was having business referred to it by introducers, like CL&P, and it was then introducing business to Options.
- Douglas Baillie Ltd wasn't offering the consumers it was introducing to Options (like Mr M) advice on the suitability of the high risk, non-standard and unregulated investments that their Options SIPPs were being established in order to effect.
- A third party might have 'sold' to consumers the idea of transferring pension monies so as to invest in Store First and/or and other high risk, non-standard and unregulated investments, before the involvement of any regulated parties.
- The anomalous features I've mentioned above carried a significant risk of consumer detriment.

Each of these in isolation is significant, but cumulatively I think they demonstrate that there was a significant risk of consumer detriment associated with the introductions Options received from Douglas Baillie Ltd. I think that Options ought to have had real concerns that Douglas Baillie Ltd wasn't acting in customers' best interests and wasn't meeting its regulatory obligations.

Options didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Mr M fairly by accepting his application from Douglas Baillie Ltd. To my mind, Options didn't meet its regulatory obligations or good industry practice at the relevant time and allowed Mr M to be put at significant risk of detriment as a result. Options should have concluded, and *before* it accepted Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd, that it shouldn't accept introductions from Douglas Baillie Ltd. I therefore conclude that it's fair and reasonable in the circumstances to say that Options shouldn't have accepted Mr M's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd at all.

And, to be clear, even if I thought Options had undertaken adequate due diligence on Store First, and had acted appropriately in permitting this investment into its SIPPs (which, as I'll explain below, I don't), I'd still consider it fair and reasonable to uphold Mr M's complaint on the basis of what I've already set out above – that Options shouldn't have accepted Mr M's introduction from Douglas Baillie Ltd in the first place.

But for completeness, I've gone on to consider the due diligence that Options carried out on the Store First investment.

Options due diligence the Store First investment

I'm satisfied that, to meet its regulatory obligations when conducting its business, Options was required to consider whether to accept or reject a particular investment, with the Principles in mind.

I think that it's fair and reasonable to expect Options to have looked carefully at the Store First investment *before* permitting it into its SIPPs. To be clear, for Options to accept the Store First investment without carrying out a level of due diligence that was consistent with its regulatory obligations, while asking its customer to accept warnings absolving it of the consequences, wouldn't in my view be fair and reasonable or sufficient. And if Options didn't look at the investment in detail, and if such a detailed look would have revealed that potential investors might be being misled, or that the investment might not be secure or might be fraudulent, it wouldn't in my view be fair or reasonable to say Options had exercised due skill, care and diligence – or treated its customer fairly – by accepting such an investment.

The actions Options took in considering whether to permit the Store First investment into its SIPPs are set out in detail in the background section above, so I won't repeat them here.

In respect of the searches, these were carried out on the promoter of Store First, Harley Scott Holdings Ltd, not Store First itself – perhaps because at that point Store First was just being established. The result of the searches reported that Harley Scott Holdings Ltd had a website address "*dylanharvey.com*", and had changed its name three times having previously been called Dylan Harvey Group Ltd, Dylan Harvey Ltd and Grangemate Ltd. The report also said County Court Judgments ('CCJs') were recorded against the business and that auditors had made adverse comments in the previous three reporting years.

It's not clear what consideration Options gave to this report, after it obtained it. But, in my view, it would have been fair and reasonable for it to have conducted some further basic searches, given there were factors in the report which ought to have been of concern –

namely the adverse comments for the previous three years, the CCJs, and the fact the business had recently changed its name.

Had such further basic searches been completed I think it likely they would've revealed that, at the time, Dylan Harvey Ltd and one of its directors, Mr W, were the subject of national press reports, online petitions and proposed legal action, as a result of a failed property investment. It was reported that hundreds of investors had invested in a scheme to develop flats, but the flats hadn't been built and the investors had been unable to recover their money. Those investors were behind the online petitions and proposed legal action.

Options says it obtained copies of Store First's marketing material. It has provided us with copies of this. Again, I accept that potentially this was good practice. In order to correctly understand the nature of the investment, I think it's fair and reasonable to say Options should have reviewed how Store First was marketed to investors – particularly as it was proceeding on the basis that these investments were being made by consumers without regulated advice being provided. Clearly Options thought it was important to look at this material at the time too.

Consistent with its regulatory obligations, Options should not only have obtained the material but should also have given careful consideration to it. The marketing material obtained by Options at the relevant time included the following prominent statements:

“You will receive guaranteed returns from a 6 year lease already in place upon completion, making this a high yielding, hassle-free investment which has been specifically designed to meet the needs of todays (sic) astute investor.”

“You will receive a 6 year lease in place upon completion. The lease produces an excellent return of 8% (guaranteed for the first 2 years) rising to over 12% in years 5 and 6. The lease contains upward-only rental reviews and break clauses for both parties every two years.”

“Guaranteed exit route option.”

It then goes on to set out in a table the returns payable in years 1&2, 3&4 and 5&6 at 8%, 10% and 12%. In the question and answer section the following is included:

“What rental income can I expect?”

Storepod rental starts at £17 per Sq/Ft per annum. The 6 year tenancy/lease in place on your Storepod has fixed upwards only rental reviews and break clauses (for both parties) every 2 years. This produces an 8% yield on your investment within the first two years, this then is predicted to rise to over 10% return in years 3&4 and then surpass 12% return in years 5&6.

Can I easily re-sell my Storepod?

Yes. You can re-sell your Storepod at any time and selling your Storepod couldn't be simpler. Store First Ltd can market your Storepod upon your request. We believe that because Storepods are so competitively priced when new, they will make a very attractive sale proposition in the future. We also expect that many tenants will wish to purchase the Storepod they are using. For example, other self storage PLCs usually achieve rent of between £20.00 - £25.00 per square foot. Our Storepods are costed at a rent of only £17.00 per square foot; once higher rents are achieved the capital value of the Storepod will increase.

Guaranteed exit route?

In year 5, investors have the option to enter the guaranteed buy-back scheme. In this scheme, Store First Management Ltd will guarantee to buy the Storepod back off the investor for the original price paid within the next 5 years. This is a unique offer in the market place and we are happy to be able to offer this exit route to our investors. Most investors are driven to keep the property investment they have purchased and carry on receiving the rental yield produced for years to come, this means only a very limited number of Storepods per centre will ever come onto the resale market, this creates a high sale value and demand for the future”.

The material says the “*figures shown are for illustration purposes*”. But it doesn’t contain any type of risk warning, or illustrations of any other returns. No explanation of the guarantees was offered, or the basis of the projected returns – other than Store First’s own confidence in its business model and the self-storage marketplace.

I note Options considered a report by Enhance Support Solutions. In my view this was of limited value. It was brief and based only on some of the material Options had regard to i.e., the marketing material and lease documents. As a result, I think Options should have found it difficult to reconcile the view reached by Enhance Support Solutions with the information available to Options. The report said:

“The following parties are involved in this investment: Seller of the sub-lease: Store First Limited UK Promoter: Harley Scott Holdings Limited No adverse history has been found affecting these parties. A CCJ was issued against the promoter of the scheme however we understand this arose from a disputed invoice which is in the course of being settled. This is [sic] any event does not directly impact on the investment”.

This conclusion is inconsistent with the result of Options’ own company searches, which reported the adverse comments for the previous three years, the CCJs, and that the business had recently changed its name. The report also makes no comment on the obvious issues with the marketing material. So, I don’t think Options should have taken any comfort from the Enhance Support Solution report or attached any significant weight to it.

If Options had completed sufficient due diligence on Store First, what ought it reasonably to have concluded?

The failure of the previous scheme which Dylan Harley/Harley Scott Holdings had been involved in may have been entirely down to market forces. But I think the fact that the company which had approached Options about Store First – and on which Options had conducted searches – had recently been involved in a property investment scheme which had failed, had recently changed its name, and had been subject to a number of adverse comments in succession, following audit, ought to have given Options significant cause for concern. Particularly when it considered the marketing material for Store First.

In my view there were a number of things about the marketing material which ought to have given Options significant cause for concern and led it to have drawn similar conclusions to those later drawn by SSA UK (on the basis of a report by Deloitte LLP) and the Insolvency Service. Namely, that there was a significant risk that potential investors were being misled.

I think, as it had regard to this material, Options could not overlook the fact that Store First appeared to be presenting the investment as one that was assured to provide high and rising returns, was underwritten by guarantees, and offered a high level of liquidity together with a strong prospect of a capital return – despite the fact that there was no investor protection

associated with the investment and that, in Options' own words, there was no apparent established market for the investment and the investment was potentially illiquid.

Store First had no proven track record for investors and so Options couldn't be certain that the investment operated as claimed. Options should also have been concerned about a guarantee offered by a new business with no track record (and promoted by a business with a questionable one).

I think, in light of this, Options should have been concerned that consumers may have been misled or did not properly understand the investment they intended to make. Consumers could easily have been given the impression, from the marketing material, that they were assured of high returns with little or no risk and would easily be able to sell their investment when they wished to. Such an impression was clearly misleading.

From the evidence I've seen I think the information Store First was publishing *before* Mr M's Options monies were invested with it, including marketing material available through its website, gave rise to a significant risk that potential investors were being misled by Store First. And I think Options ought to have identified this *before* permitting the Store First investment into its SIPPs. This is a clear point of concern, which I think Options ought reasonably to have identified *before* it accepted Mr M's application to invest in Store First.

In my opinion, the issues I've identified above should have, when considered objectively, put Options on notice from the beginning that there was a significant risk of consumer detriment. And, without more evidence to ensure the investment was an appropriate one to permit within its SIPPs, I'm satisfied that Options shouldn't have accepted the Store First investment.

Had Options done what it ought to have done, and drawn reasonable conclusions from what it knew or ought to have known, I think that it ought to have concluded there was a significant risk of consumer detriment if it accepted the Store First investment into its SIPPs and that the Store First investment wasn't acceptable for its SIPPs.

As such, and based on the available evidence, I don't think Options undertook appropriate steps or drew reasonable conclusions from the information that I'm satisfied would have been available to it, had it undertaken adequate due diligence into the Store First investment *before* it accepted that investment into its SIPPs. I don't think Options met its regulatory obligations and, in accepting Mr M's application to invest in Store First, it allowed Mr M's funds to be put at significant risk.

To be clear, I don't say Options should have identified all the issues the SSA UK press release set out or to have foreseen the issues which later came to light with Store First. I only say that, based on the information available to Options at the relevant time, it should have drawn a similar overall conclusion – that there was a significant risk that potential investors were being misled. I'm satisfied, on a fair and reasonable basis, that a significant risk of consumer detriment ought to have been apparent from the information available to Options at the time. And I do think that appropriate checks would have revealed issues which were, in and of themselves, sufficient basis for Options to have declined to accept the Store First investment in its SIPPs *before* Mr M invested in it. And it's the failure of Options' due diligence that's resulted in Mr M being treated unfairly and unreasonably.

There's a difference between accepting or rejecting a particular investment for a SIPP and advising on its suitability for the individual investor. I accept Options wasn't expected to, nor was it able to, give advice to Mr M on the suitability of the SIPP and/or Store First investment for him personally. To be clear, I'm not making a finding that Options should have assessed

the suitability of the Store First investment for Mr M. I accept Options had no obligation to give advice to Mr M, or to ensure otherwise the suitability of an investment for him.

And I'm also not saying that Options shouldn't have allowed the Store First investment into its SIPPs because it was high risk. My finding isn't that Options should have concluded that Mr M wasn't a candidate for high risk investments or that an investment in Store First was unsuitable for Mr M. Instead, it's my fair and reasonable opinion that there were things Options knew or ought to have known about the Store First investment and how it was being marketed which ought to have led Options to conclude it wouldn't be consistent with its regulatory obligations or good practice to allow it into its SIPPs. And that Options failed to act with due skill, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Mr M fairly by accepting the Store First investment into his SIPP.

Acting fairly and reasonably to investors (including Mr M), Options should have concluded that it wouldn't permit the Store First investment to be held in its SIPPs *at all*. And I'm satisfied that it's more likely than not that Mr M's pension monies were only transferred to Options so as to enable the Store First investment. So, I think it's likely that if Options hadn't permitted the Store First investment to be held in its SIPPs at all, Mr M's pension monies wouldn't have been transferred to Options. And further, that Mr M wouldn't then have suffered the losses he's suffered as a result of transferring to Options and investing in Store First.

Did Options act fairly and reasonably in proceeding with Mr M's instructions?

Options says, in similar cases, that it was the client's decision to proceed on an execution-only basis and Options made this clear to them. Options has also made the point, in other cases, that COBS 11.2.19R obliged it to execute investment instructions. It effectively says that once the SIPP has been established, it is required to execute the specific instructions of its client. Before considering this point, I think it is important for me to reiterate that, it was not fair and reasonable for Options to have accepted Mr M's SIPP application from Douglas Baillie Ltd in the first place. So, in my opinion, Mr M's SIPP should not have been established and the opportunity to execute investment instructions or proceed in reliance on an indemnity should not have arisen at all.

In any event, Options' argument about having to execute the transaction as a result of COBS 11.2.19R was considered and rejected by the judge in BBSAL. In that case, Jacobs J said:

"The heading to COBS 11.2.1R shows that it is concerned with the manner in which orders are to be executed: i.e. on terms most favourable to the client. This is consistent with the heading to COBS 11.2 as a whole, namely: "Best execution". The text of COBS 11.2.1R is to the same effect. The expression "when executing orders" indicates that it is looking at the moment when the firm comes to execute the order, and the way in which the firm must then conduct itself. It is concerned with the "mechanics" of execution; a conclusion reached, albeit in a different context, in Bailey & Anr v Barclays Bank [2014] EWHC 2882 (QB), paras [34] – [35]. It is not addressing an anterior question, namely whether a particular order should be executed at all. I agree with the FCA's submission that COBS 11.2 is a section of the Handbook concerned with the method of execution of client orders, and is designed to achieve a high quality of execution. It presupposes that there is an order being executed, and refers to the factors that must be taken into account when deciding how best to execute the order. It has nothing to do with the question of whether or not the order should be accepted in the first place."

Therefore, I don't think Options' argument on this point is relevant to its obligations under the Principles to decide whether or not to accept an application to open a SIPP in the first place or to execute the instruction to make the investments i.e., to proceed with the application.

Was it fair and reasonable in all the circumstances for Options to proceed with Mr M's application?

For the reasons given above, I think Options shouldn't have accepted Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and I also think it shouldn't have accepted the Store First investment into his SIPP. So, things shouldn't have got beyond that.

And, to be clear, even if I thought Options had undertaken adequate due diligence on Douglas Baillie Ltd and acted appropriately in accepting Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd (which, as I've explained, I don't), I'd still consider it fair and reasonable to uphold Mr M's complaint on the basis that Options didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Mr M fairly, by accepting the Store First investment into his SIPP.

I make this point here to emphasise that while I've concluded *both* that Options shouldn't have accepted Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and also that it shouldn't have accepted his applications to invest in Store First, if I had only reached the conclusions I've set out above on one of those aspects and not also gone on to reach findings on the other aspect for completeness, I'd still consider it fair and reasonable in all the circumstances to uphold this complaint. That's because Options didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Mr M fairly by accepting his business from Douglas Baillie Ltd. And because, separately, Options also didn't act with due skill, care and diligence, organise and control its affairs responsibly, or treat Mr M fairly, by accepting the Store First investment into his SIPP. And to my mind, Options didn't meet its regulatory obligations or good industry practice at the relevant times and allowed Mr M to be put at significant risk of detriment as a result.

Further, in my view it's fair and reasonable to say that just having Mr M sign declarations, wasn't an effective way for Options to meet its regulatory obligations to treat him fairly, given the concerns Options ought to have had about the business being introduced by Douglas Baillie Ltd and the Store First investment.

Options knew Mr M had signed forms intended to acknowledge, amongst other things, his awareness of some of the risks involved with investing and to indemnify Options against losses that arose from acting on his instructions. And, in my opinion, relying on the contents of such forms when Options knew, or ought to have known, that both the type of business it was receiving from Douglas Baillie Ltd and allowing the Store First investment to be held within its SIPPs would put investors at significant risk, wasn't the fair and reasonable thing to do. Having identified the risks I've mentioned above, I think the fair and reasonable thing for Options to do would have been to decline to accept Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and to refuse to accept the Store First investment in his SIPP.

The Principles exist to ensure regulated firms treat their clients fairly. And I don't think the paperwork Mr M signed meant that Options could ignore its duty to treat him fairly. To be clear, I'm satisfied that indemnities contained within the contractual documents don't absolve, nor do they attempt to absolve, Options of its regulatory obligations to treat customers fairly when deciding whether to accept or reject investments or business.

So, I'm satisfied that Mr M's Options SIPP shouldn't have been established and his SIPP monies shouldn't have been invested in the Store First holdings. And that the opportunity for

Options to execute investment instructions to invest Mr M's monies in Store First or to proceed in reliance on an indemnity and/or risk disclaimers shouldn't have arisen at all.

I'm of the view that it wasn't fair and reasonable in all the circumstances for Options to accept Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd or for it to accept his application to invest in Store First.

Is it fair to ask Options to pay Mr M compensation in the circumstances?

The involvement of other parties

In this decision I'm considering Mr M's complaint about Options. But I accept other parties were involved in the transactions complained about, including Douglas Baillie Ltd and another party, probably CL&P.

Mr M pursued an FSCS claim against Douglas Baillie Ltd. The FSCS upheld Mr M's claim, calculated his losses to be in excess of £130,000 and paid him its limit of £50,000 compensation. Following this, the FSCS provided Mr M with a reassignment of rights.

The DISP rules set out that when an Ombudsman's determination includes a money award, then that money award may be such amount as the Ombudsman considers to be fair compensation for financial loss, whether or not a Court would award compensation (DISP 3.7.2R).

In my opinion it's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of this case to hold Options accountable for its own failure to comply with its regulatory obligations, good industry practice and to treat Mr M fairly.

The starting point, therefore, is that it would be fair to require Options to pay Mr M compensation for the loss he's suffered as a result of its failings. I've carefully considered if there's any reason why it wouldn't be fair to ask Options to compensate Mr M for his loss.

I accept that other parties, including Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or CL&P, might have some responsibility for initiating the course of action that led to Mr M's loss. However, I'm satisfied that it's also the case that if Options had complied with its own distinct regulatory obligations as a SIPP operator, the arrangement for Mr M wouldn't have come about in the first place, and the loss he's suffered could have been avoided.

I want to make clear that I've taken everything Options has said into consideration. And it's my view that it's appropriate and fair in the circumstances for Options to compensate Mr M to the full extent of the financial losses he's suffered due to Options' failings. And, having carefully considered everything, I don't think that it would be appropriate or fair in the circumstances to reduce the compensation amount that Options is liable to pay to Mr M.

Mr M taking responsibility for his own investment decisions

In reaching my conclusions in this case I've thought about section 5(2)(d) of the FSMA (now section 1C). This section requires the FCA, in securing an appropriate degree of protection for consumers, to have regard to, amongst other things, the general principle that consumers should take responsibility for their own investment decisions.

I've considered this point carefully and I'm satisfied that it wouldn't be fair or reasonable to say Mr M's actions mean he should bear the loss arising as a result of Options' failings.

In my view, if Options had acted in accordance with its regulatory obligations and good industry practice it shouldn't have accepted Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd or accepted his application to invest in Store First at all. That should have been the end of the matter – if either of those things had happened, I'm satisfied the arrangement for Mr M wouldn't have come about in the first place, and the loss he's suffered could have been avoided.

As I've made clear, Options needed to carry out appropriate initial and ongoing due diligence on Douglas Baillie Ltd and the Store First investment and reach the right conclusions. I think it failed to do this. And just having Mr M sign forms containing declarations and indemnities wasn't an effective way of Options meeting its obligations, or of escaping liability where it failed to meet its obligations.

Douglas Baillie Ltd was a regulated firm who had advised Mr M on his pension transfer. I'm satisfied that Mr M trusted Douglas Baillie Ltd to act in his best interests. Mr M also then used the services of a regulated personal pension provider, Options.

I've carefully considered what Options has said about clients being aware of the risks – that they signed documents confirming the investments were high risk. And that the client chose to accept a cash incentive and not disclose it to Options, thereby contributing to the loss they suffered. As I explain below, I don't agree that the evidence we've seen to date supports the contention that it's more likely than not that Mr M understood the Store First investment was high risk. But, in any eventuality, this is a secondary point because, as mentioned above, if Options had acted in accordance with its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, I'm satisfied the arrangement for Mr M wouldn't have come about in the first place.

So, overall, I'm satisfied that in the circumstances, for all the reasons given, it's fair and reasonable to say Options should compensate Mr M for the loss he's suffered. I don't think it would be fair to say in the circumstances that Mr M should suffer the loss because he ultimately instructed the transactions to be executed.

Had Options declined Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd, would the transactions complained about still have been effected elsewhere?

Options has argued in other, similar, cases, that it did not cause the client's loss because it is very likely that they were extremely keen to proceed with the investment to release funds and would have found a way to invest even if Options had not been dealing with Douglas Baillie Ltd or if it had not been accepting Store First investments. It says that if it had refused to process a client's application for any reason, they would've likely made the same investment via a different SIPP provider. So, they would have suffered the same loss.

However, Options has provided no evidence to support an argument that Mr M wanted to open a SIPP and invest his SIPP monies in Store First no matter what.

I've thought carefully about what Mr M would likely have done if Options had told him it was rejecting his business.

From what Mr M has said, I think that his pension monies were transferred to Options in order to make the Store First investment. That's supported by the advice letter Douglas Baillie Ltd prepared for Mr M and provided to Options. That letter contained the following wording:

“It has been confirmed to me that you wish to transfer your benefits into a SIPP rather than a fully insured plan as you wish to make an investment with your pension that would not be available via a fully insured plan.”

It doesn't appear that Mr M has accessed any benefits from his pension or made any contributions to it. This is supported by the FSCS calculation summary. So, I'm satisfied a transfer wouldn't have been effected elsewhere at the time, and with monies not being withdrawn being invested in holdings that weren't Store First, just so as to access a pension commencement lump sum and/or pension income.

And I don't think it's fair and reasonable to say that Options shouldn't compensate Mr M for his loss on the basis of speculation that another SIPP operator would have made the same mistakes as I've found Options did. I think it's fair instead to assume that another SIPP provider would have complied with its regulatory obligations and good industry practice, and therefore wouldn't have accepted Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd or permitted the Store First investment into its SIPPs.

In the circumstances, I'm satisfied it's fair and reasonable to conclude that if Options had refused to accept Mr M's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or hadn't permitted the Store First investment in its SIPPs, the transactions wouldn't still have gone ahead, and Mr M would have retained his monies in his DB scheme.

And had Options explained to Mr M why it refused to accept his application from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or hadn't permitted the Store First investment in its SIPPs, I think it very unlikely Mr M would've tried to find another SIPP operator to accept the business.

In *Adams v Options SIPP*, the judge found that Mr Adams would have proceeded with the transaction regardless. HHJ Dight says (at paragraph 32):

"The Claimant knew that it was a high risk and speculative investment but nevertheless decided to proceed with it, because of the cash incentive."

Options says consumers like Mr M understood the investments were high risk. But Mr M has explained that "*Nobody said there were any risks*". He proceeded on the basis that there was no risk and that it would provide him with a much better pension than he already had. He feels the investment was mis-sold with the associated risks not clearly explained to him by CL&P or Douglas Baillie Ltd.

I've carefully considered what Options has said about clients being aware of the risks – that Options provided the client with numerous risk warnings regarding their chosen investments, including the warnings in the Member Declaration and Indemnity forms they signed, and these forms were very clear regarding what the investments were and that they were high risk.

But I think the information Mr M likely received at the start regarding the Store First investment presented the investment, in detail, as providing high returns with little to no risk. I'm also mindful that the Member Declaration and Indemnity form – which included amongst more than twenty 'declarations', "*I understand this investment is an Unregulated "Alternative Investment" and as such is considered High Risk and Speculative and that it may prove difficult to value, sell / realise*" – was not given to Mr M until several months after he'd been 'sold' the investment by an introducer (a copy was given to him in September 2012, and a revised copy given to him in December 2012). Furthermore, the declaration on both versions of the form seems to be quite generic, referring to unregulated, alternative investments generally.

Overall, I don't agree the contents of the form support the contention that Mr M understood the Store First investment was high risk. In this case, I'm not persuaded that Mr M, an individual who was unemployed at the time, had a modest pension pot (in terms of transfer

value) and no investment experience, proceeded in the knowledge that the investments he was making were high risk.

I'm also not persuaded that Mr M was determined to move forward with the transaction in order to take advantage of a cash incentive. Mr M has confirmed he received a £3,000 payment, but I've not seen any evidence to suggest Mr M had an overriding need for the cash which would have outweighed other considerations. On balance, I'm satisfied that Mr M wasn't eager to complete the transaction for reasons other than securing the best pension for himself.

Having carefully considered all of the circumstances, I'm satisfied it's fair and reasonable to conclude that if Options had refused to accept Mr M's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or to permit Store First investments in its SIPPs, the transactions this complaint concerns wouldn't still have gone ahead.

In conclusion

In another, similar, complaint, Options has said it shouldn't be upheld because the FCA visited Options and approved its due diligence procedures in September 2011, before Options accepted Mr M's SIPP application in 2012. However, Options hasn't provided any evidence to support this argument. And ultimately, what I've looked at here is whether Options took reasonable care, acted with due diligence and treated Mr M fairly, in accordance with his best interests. And what I think is fair and reasonable in light of that.

And taking everything into consideration, I think that in the circumstances of this case it's fair and reasonable for me to conclude that Options should have decided not to accept business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or to accept the Store First investment to be held in its SIPPs *before* it had received Mr M's application from Douglas Baillie Ltd. I conclude that if Options hadn't accepted Mr M's introduction from Douglas Baillie Ltd and/or the Store First investment to be held in its SIPPs, Mr M wouldn't have established an Options SIPP, transferred his DB Scheme monies into it or invested in Store First.

For the reasons I've set out, I also think it's fair and reasonable to direct Options to compensate Mr M for the loss he's suffered as a result of Options accepting his business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and permitting him to invest his SIPP monies in Store First. I say this having given careful consideration to the *Adams v Options* judgments but also bearing in mind that my role is to reach a decision that's fair and reasonable in the circumstances of the case having taken account of all relevant considerations.

Overall, I think it's fair and reasonable to direct Options to pay Mr M compensation in the circumstances. While I accept that other parties might have some responsibility for initiating the course of action that's led to Mr M's loss, I consider that Options failed to comply with its own regulatory obligations and didn't put a stop to the transactions proceeding by declining to accept Mr M's applications when it had the opportunity to do so. And I'm satisfied that Mr M wouldn't have established the Options SIPP, transferred monies in from his DB scheme, or invested in Store First if it hadn't been for Options' failings.

In my view, in considering what fair compensation looks like in this case, it's reasonable to make an award against Options that requires it to compensate Mr M for the full measure of his loss.

I've seen nothing to suggest Mr M has previously sold any of his Store First holdings. But whether or not Mr M has previously managed to sell any of his Store First holdings doesn't alter my opinion that, but for Options' failings, Mr M's pension monies wouldn't have been transferred to Options and invested in Store First. Further, and from a redress perspective,

I'm satisfied that Options will need to check whether there are still any Store First investments held in Mr M's SIPP when it's performing the first step of the redress calculation I've set out below.

Putting things right

My aim is to return Mr M to the position he'd now be in but for what I consider to be Options' failure to carry out adequate due diligence checks before accepting Mr M's business from Douglas Baillie Ltd and before permitting Mr M to invest his Options SIPP monies in Store First.

Options should calculate fair compensation by comparing the current position to the position Mr M would be in if he'd not transferred from his defined benefit (DB) pension scheme. In summary, Options should:

1. Take ownership of the Store First investment if possible.
2. Calculate and pay compensation for the loss Mr M's pension provisions have suffered as a result of Options accepting his applications.
3. If Mr M has paid any fees or charges from funds outside of his pension arrangements, Options should also refund these to Mr M. Interest at a rate of 8% simple per year from date of payment to date of refund should be added to this.
4. Pay Mr M £500 for the distress and inconvenience he's suffered.

I explain how Options should carry out these steps in further detail below.

Take ownership of the Store First investments if possible.

For the SIPP to be closed and further SIPP fees to be prevented, any remaining Store First investments need to be removed from Mr M's SIPP. To do this, Options should calculate an amount it's willing to accept for Mr M's Store First investment and pay that sum into Mr M's SIPP and take ownership of the Store First investment. Any sums paid into the SIPP to purchase the Store First investment will then make up part of the current actual value of the SIPP.

If Options is unable to purchase the Store First investment, the actual value of any Store First investment it doesn't purchase should be assumed to be nil for the purposes of the redress calculation. To be clear, this would include their being given a nil value for the purposes of ascertaining the current value of Mr M's SIPP.

I think this is fair because I think it's unlikely the Store First investment will have any significant realisable value in the future. Further, I understand Mr M has the option of returning his Store First investment to the freeholder for nil consideration. And that should assist Mr M to close his SIPP if Options is unable to take ownership of his Store First investment.

In the event the Store First investment remains in the SIPP, as Options is unable to purchase it and Mr M decides not to transfer it to the freeholder, Mr M should be aware that he will be liable for all future costs associated with the investment such as the ongoing SIPP fees, business rates, ground rent and any other charges. He should also be aware it's unlikely he will be able to make a further complaint about these costs.

Options has argued in other, similar, cases that if the Store First investment remains in Mr M's SIPP, or otherwise with Mr M, with no adjustment in the redress, this would give

Mr M an unfair windfall. Though I think it's unlikely, it is possible that the Store First investment may have some realisable value in the future. So, in this instance, for any investments assumed to be nil value Options may ask Mr M to provide an undertaking to account to it for a sum equivalent to the net amount of any payment the SIPP may receive from those investment(s) in the future. That undertaking should allow for the effect of any tax and charges on the amount Mr M may receive from the investment(s) and any eventual sums he would be able to access. Options should meet any costs in drawing up the undertaking.

Calculate and pay compensation for the loss Mr M's pension provisions have suffered as a result of Options accepting his applications

A fair and reasonable outcome would be for Options to put Mr M, as far as possible, into the position he'd now be in if it hadn't accepted his application from Douglas Baillie Ltd. As explained above, had this occurred I consider it's more likely than not Mr M would have remained in his DB scheme.

Options has said in other, similar, cases that the correct basis for calculating redress is as set out in the Court of Appeal judgment in Adams. But ultimately the regulator has set out what it deems to be appropriate redress to put right instances of unsuitable DB pension transfer. And I see no reason to depart from this in the circumstances of this complaint.

Options must therefore undertake a redress calculation in line with the rules for calculating redress for non-compliant pension transfer advice, as detailed in policy statement PS22/13 and set out in the regulator's handbook in DISP App 4:
<https://www.handbook.fca.org.uk/handbook/DISP/App/4/?view=chapter>.

This calculation should be carried out using the most recent financial assumptions in line with PS22/13 and DISP App 4. In accordance with the regulator's expectations, this should be undertaken or submitted to an appropriate provider promptly following receipt of notification of Mr M's acceptance of this, my final decision.

Account should also be taken of the £3,000 'incentive' payment paid out to Mr M. This can be taken into account in the calculation by way of treating it as an income withdrawal payment paid at the outset.

If the redress calculation demonstrates a loss, as explained in policy statement PS22/13 and set out in DISP App 4, Options should:

- always calculate and offer Mr M redress as a cash lump sum payment,
- explain to Mr M before starting the redress calculation that:
 - his redress will be calculated on the basis that it will be invested prudently (in line with the cautious investment return assumption used in the calculation), and
 - a straightforward way to invest his redress prudently is to use it to augment his defined contribution pension
- offer to calculate how much of any redress Mr M receives could be augmented rather than receiving it all as a cash lump sum,
- if Mr M accepts Options' offer to calculate how much of his redress could be augmented, request the necessary information and not charge Mr M for the calculation, even if he ultimately decides not to have any of his redress augmented, and
- take a prudent approach when calculating how much redress could be augmented, given the inherent uncertainty around Mr M's end of year tax position.

I acknowledge that Mr M has received a sum of compensation from the FSCS, and that he has had the use of the monies received from the FSCS. The terms of Mr M's reassignment of rights require him to return compensation paid by the FSCS in the event this complaint is successful, and I understand that the FSCS will ordinarily enforce the terms of the assignment if required. So, I think it's fair and reasonable to make no *permanent* deduction in the redress calculation for the compensation Mr M received from the FSCS. And it will be for Mr M to make the arrangements to make any repayments he needs to make to the FSCS. However, I do think it's fair and reasonable for some allowance to be made for the sum(s) Mr M actually received from the FSCS and has had the use of for a period of the time covered by the calculation.

As such, for the purposes of the calculation that's being carried out using the most recent financial assumptions in line with PS22/13 and DISP App 4, if it wishes, Options *may* notionally, for the period from the point of their payment through until the valuation date (as per the DISP App 4 definition of that term), allow for the payment(s) Mr M received from the FSCS following the claim about Douglas Baillie Ltd, as an income withdrawal payment. Where such an allowance is made then Options must also, at the end of the calculation, allow for a notional addition to the overall calculated loss that's equivalent to the payment(s) Mr M received from the FSCS following the claim about Douglas Baillie Ltd. The effect of this notional addition will be to increase the overall loss calculated using the most recent financial assumptions in line with PS22/13 and DISP App 4, by a sum that's equivalent to the payment(s) Mr M received from the FSCS.

Redress paid to Mr M as a cash lump sum will be treated as income for tax purposes. So, in line with DISP App 4, Options may make a notional deduction to cash lump sum payments to take account of tax that Mr M would otherwise pay on income from his pension. It's reasonable to assume that Mr M is likely to be a basic rate taxpayer at his selected retirement age, so the reduction would equal 20%. However, if Mr M would have been able to take a tax-free lump sum, the reduction should be applied to 75% of the compensation, resulting in an overall reduction of 15%.

Fees and charges paid outside the SIPP

If Mr M has paid any fees or charges from funds outside of his pension arrangements, Options should also refund these to Mr M. Interest at a rate of 8% simple per year from date of payment to date of refund should be added to this.

Income tax may be payable on any interest paid. If Options deducts income tax from the interest, it should tell Mr M how much has been taken off. Options should give Mr M a tax deduction certificate in respect of interest if Mr M asks for one, so he can reclaim the tax on interest from HMRC if appropriate.

Pay Mr M £500 for the distress he's suffered

In addition to the financial loss that Mr M has suffered as a result of the problems with his pension, I think it's fair and reasonable to say that the loss of a significant portion, if not all, of his pension provision has caused Mr M distress. So, I think that it's fair for Options to compensate him for this as well.

Award limit

Where I uphold a complaint, I can award fair compensation of up to £160,000, plus any interest and/or costs that I consider are appropriate. Where I consider that fair compensation requires payment of an amount that might exceed £160,000, I may recommend that the business pays the balance.

Until the calculations are carried out, I don't know how much the compensation will be, and it may be nowhere near £160,000, which is the maximum sum that I'm able to award in Mr M's complaint. But I'll also make a recommendation below in the event that the compensation is to exceed this sum, although I can't require that Options pays this.

Determination and award: I uphold the complaint. I consider that fair compensation should be calculated as set out above. Options UK Personal Pensions LLP should pay the amount produced by that calculation up to the maximum of £160,000 (including distress and/or inconvenience but excluding costs) plus any interest set out above.

Recommendation: If the amount produced by the calculation of fair compensation exceeds £160,000, I recommend Options UK Personal Pensions LLP pay Mr M the balance plus any interest on the balance as set out above.

The recommendation isn't part of my determination or award. Options UK Personal Pensions LLP doesn't have to do what I recommend. It's unlikely that Mr M could accept a decision and go to court to ask for the balance and Mr M may want to get independent legal advice before deciding whether to accept a decision.

My final decision

For the reasons given, my decision is that I uphold this complaint. To put things right I require that Options UK Personal Pensions LLP must calculate and pay Mr M the award set out above.

Under the rules of the Financial Ombudsman Service, I'm required to ask Mr M to accept or reject my decision before 14 June 2024.

Beth Wilcox
Ombudsman