

## Bank shuts accounts of dissenters

### BANKING

**A**lliance & Leicester (A&L) has admitted to closing dozens of bank accounts belonging to customers who have dared to challenge its high penalty charges.

Which? revealed in June that banks made about £4.7 billion last year from charging customers high fees for exceeding their overdraft limit and for payments bounced or paid from such accounts.

Some customers have made legal challenges to these fees. But rather than let cases go to court, A&L has refunded charges – as ‘goodwill’ – and then shut the accounts. Other lenders may follow: Nationwide is considering it, and Abbey says some customers may have made a legal challenge before it shut their account but that wasn’t the reason for shutting it.

We believe there’s a risk that a customer’s credit rating could suffer unless banks are careful to tell credit agencies that an account isn’t being shut because the customer’s defaulted. We’ve asked the banks watchdog to ensure ratings are safe.

A&L charges £25 on the second day if you go over your limit, and another £25 on the fifth day. On top of that, it takes £25 for paying, say, a direct debit, or £34 for bouncing it, while you’re over the limit.

A&L says its charges are reasonable and that if customers take legal action, it shows they’re unhappy with the account and a ‘clean break’ is best for both sides.



#### TAKE ACTION!

#### Challenge bank charges

■ If you want to challenge high bank fees, see [www.which.co.uk/bankcharges](http://www.which.co.uk/bankcharges). Make sure you open an account elsewhere before pursuing any legal challenge.

Roofer is barred from running own roofing business

## Rip-off trader given Asbo

### HOUSE AND HOME

**C**owboy tradesmen who con customers with rip-off bills and shoddy work now face being slapped with an anti-social behaviour order (Asbo).

Last month, Newcastle roofer James Bowes, 46, was given a three-year Asbo barring him from running his own roofing business. Bowes had preyed on vulnerable customers to fund his crack habit and in one case charged almost £1,000 more than the job was actually worth.

It’s the second time we’ve seen a tradesman slapped with an Asbo. Dave O’Brien, Head of Newcastle City Trading Standards, says it’s a weapon it will be using more often: ‘This is the first time we have applied for an Asbo against a tradesman and it is a tool we will use more in the future. These orders should serve to protect consumers from the likes of James Bowes.

‘This is a man who preyed on the most vulnerable members of society. People should always be careful when approached by strangers offering to do work.’

Magistrates heard that Bowes, trading as Fenham Roofing, approached an 84-year-old man and told him that he had roof tiles missing. When the man agreed to have the tiles replaced, Bowes quoted for



James Bowes was given an Asbo

**‘This is a man who preyed on the most vulnerable members of society’**

extra work and billed £1,220, almost £1,000 more than it should have cost.

Bowes also approached a 71-year-old woman, saying she needed to have her chimney repointed and two tiles replaced. He offered her a ‘discounted’ rate of £420 and completed the work in 45 minutes.

But when she later became suspicious and cancelled her cheque, Bowes threatened to destroy the work if she didn’t pay. She called the police and contacted trading standards officers. It was later discovered that only one roof tile had been replaced and the job should have cost around £165.

Bowes, of Stanton Street, Newcastle, pleaded guilty to two deceptions and one attempted deception. He was given a six-month sentence, suspended for 12 months, and was also ordered to pay one of the victims £500.

## Amex angers card customers

### MONEY

**A**merican Express has angered customers by going back on its offer of 0 per cent interest on the life of a balance transfer.

The credit card giant sent marketing letters to 3 per cent of its UK card holders promoting the rate in May.

Chris Wrigley thought ‘that’ll do nicely’. He said: ‘I thought I could clear

all balances and start afresh.’ But when he rang up he was told the letter was a ‘mistake’ and the offer was only for a six-month period. Chris asked Amex to honour the offer but it refused.

American Express told us it sincerely apologised to customers for the error. It said it would waive the 2 per cent handling fee on balance transfers.

#### TAKE ACTION!

#### Prices can change

■ Under civil law, a price displayed in an advertisement is called an ‘invitation to treat’, which means it’s an invite for the public to go to the seller but the company does not have to stand by its price.

£6,700 payout after reader challenges Lloyds TSB decision

# Tape shows bank error

## INSURANCE

**F**rancois Gamaury was mis-sold home contents insurance by Lloyds TSB but proved his case by using the company's own tape recording – and the insurer agreed to pay him £6,700.

Francois, a freelance film editor, moved into a new flat last year and called Lloyds for a home insurance quote. He clearly stated his occupation and told the operator that he kept the expensive editing and camera equipment he used for work at home. The Lloyds adviser assured him it was covered.

But when Francois was burgled in February this year, and the equipment was stolen, he discovered that the adviser had been wrong. Lloyds refused to pay out, saying that since the equipment was used professionally, it wasn't covered by his home contents policy.

Francois said: 'When I called Lloyds, I was so shocked to hear that the business equipment wasn't covered, I didn't even get



Film equipment was crucial for Francois Gamaury's work

**'I couldn't afford to replace the equipment'**

round to discussing the other things that were stolen. The loss would have had extreme repercussions for the business. I couldn't afford to replace the equipment.'

Francois turned to *Which?* and we told him to challenge the decision and ask for a copy of the taped call he made when he bought the insurance.

Lloyds TSB says it had already listened to the tape and shortly after his challenge it told Francois: 'We have clearly made an error.' Francois has now received his cheque for £6,700 and has been able to replace the stolen equipment.

### TAKE ACTION!

#### Request the recording

■ The Data Protection Act lets you request a copy of a taped call with a company. If your insurer rejects your claim, challenge it. If that fails, contact the Financial Ombudsman on 0845 080 1800.

### Disability access court action

■ The Arcadia Group – one of the UK's biggest clothing retailers – is facing court action for not making its Burton store in Stafford wheelchair accessible. The Disability Rights Commission is supporting the case of Joanne Holland, a wheelchair user from Derbyshire, who couldn't access the whole shop.

### Nuisance order for security light

■ The first light nuisance notice has been served on a couple whose security light was directed into their neighbour's house in West Wiltshire. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act – which came into effect in April – gives local authorities new power to act against light pollution.

### Post offices stop TV licences

■ From 1 August you'll no longer be able to buy your TV licence at post offices. Instead you can pay by credit or debit card, or by direct debit, by calling 0870 240 3352. TV licence stamps will be replaced with a savings card that can be used at PayPoint outlets.

### Ikea charges for plastic bags

■ Ikea is charging 5p for plastic bags. It says this will cut waste. From September, it will switch to biodegradable bags and the price will rise to 10p. The store is cutting the cost of its reusable 'Big Blue Bag' from 50p to 25p.

### BA limits checked-in bags

■ Economy passengers flying on British Airways (BA) will be limited to one piece of checked-in luggage weighing up to 23kg on most routes from October. From July, BA is removing the weight limit on hand luggage but you must be able to lift it into the overhead locker. You can also carry on a briefcase or laptop bag.

### CONTACT US

■ If there's something you'd like us to investigate, call 0800 252088 and leave a message or email [news@which.co.uk](mailto:news@which.co.uk)

## And finally... woodworm wash

Pity those who translate blurb on esoteric herbal products. We assume this was meant to be wormwood – but maybe it really is for getting your woodworm squeaky clean.

### GET IN TOUCH

Send your examples of daft or misleading products or promotions to Liz Edwards, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH

