

# National Crime Agency's bank signature fraud inquiry 'on track'

James Hurley Wednesday March 02 2022 The Times



Julian Watts turned over his files to the National Crime Agency in 2019  
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER LUKE MACGREGOR

The National Crime Agency has said it is conducting “ongoing inquiries” into allegations of widespread signature forgery at UK banks amid criticism of its approach to the claims.

Rob Jones, director-general of the agency’s National Economic Crime Centre, said there had been a “thorough review” of 26 lever-arch files’ worth of evidence that had prompted further action.

Jones said the NCA, working with the Serious Fraud Office and the Financial Conduct Authority, had “identified a number of individuals we wish to speak to in pursuit of our inquiries”.



The agency said it was working with the Serious Fraud Office and the Financial Conduct Authority for the inquiry  
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Jones made the comments in a written response to a letter from Mel Stride, chairman of the Treasury select committee, who last month sought an update on the agency's work to "investigate possible forgeries of signatures by banks". The committee and the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking have expressed concerns about claims that several banks have falsified signatures.

This was after [Julian Watts](#), a former management consultant turned campaigner, compiled a dossier of evidence that he claimed pointed to large-scale forgery of documents, including on papers used in court proceedings for cases such as small business disputes and mortgage repossessions.

In a [similar scandal in the United States](#), five banks including JP Morgan Chase, Citigroup and Bank of America were fined \$25 billion after defective or forged documents were used as the basis for home foreclosures.

At the request of the Treasury committee, Watts's files were passed to the NCA in 2019. It in turn gave them to the Financial Conduct Authority and the Serious Fraud Office.



No formal investigation has been launched and there has been frustration from Watts and his supporters at an apparent lack of action.

In January, Anthony Stansfeld, the former Thames Valley police and crime commissioner, wrote to Priti Patel, the home secretary, to complain about what he said was slow progress. Stansfeld said that Watts had provided evidence of "current and former bank senior manager whistleblowers" who had corroborated the claims.

"I have personally reviewed all the evidence provided by the campaign to the NCA. The evidence is clear, compelling and overwhelming," he wrote.

He added that the lack of a criminal investigation more than two years after evidence was first passed to the agency was a "total failure of the NCA's mission to protect the public by fighting serious organised crime".

Last month, Stansfeld and Watts met Damian Hinds, the security minister, to discuss their concerns that the NCA was not taking the issue seriously enough, and have requested a meeting with Patel. Stansfeld has also asked the home affairs committee to look into the agency's handling of the issue.

Watts said he remained concerned that the NCA was not taking the issue seriously enough. "Customer victims who have been contacted by the NCA don't believe it is interested in launching a genuine investigation," he said.

“My impression is that the NCA has wilful blindness to any reports of systemic crime by banks against the public and is simply trying to find reasons to deflect individual cases to the local police or Action Fraud to bury the whole issue. “There is an urgent need for an immediate inquiry into this by the home affairs committee.”

A spokeswoman for UK Finance, the banking trade body, said: “Forgery is a criminal offence and banks will continue to be vigilant against such types of fraud. We urge anyone with evidence of forgery ... to report it to their bank as well as the relevant authorities.”

An NCA spokesman said: “We are continuing to assess the material submitted and information obtained following preliminary inquiries to clarify matters with certain members of the public who had raised the issue. We are making a thorough assessment to determine whether there are grounds for a criminal or regulatory investigation.”