

EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q1 2023 (1 JANUARY 2023 – 31 MARCH 2023)



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1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

6 May 2023

This report covers the Q1 2023 quarterly period (1 January 2023 – 31 March 2023).

The number of cases raised in Q1 2023 (55 cases) was within the nominal range (50-60 cases per quarter).

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q1 2023 (2.3 calendar days) was lower than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.7 calendar days).

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q1 2023 (\$1,133) was slightly higher than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$869). This confirms that the unusually very low amount for the previous quarter Q4 2022 (\$264) was indeed simply a statistical outlier.

Approximately half of the cases raised during Q1 2023 related to the following:

- > toll invoices (31%)
- > hardship assistance (16%).

While the proportion of cases related to toll invoices is normal, the proportion of cases related to hardship assistance is much higher than usual. This is attributed to increased financial stress and uncertainty caused by higher inflation, higher interest rates, increased costs of living, and more pressure on household budgets.

Protection of customer data continues to be of critical importance.

As reported previously, during Q3 2022 EastLink completed software development for some changes to the EastLink website that have enhanced the security of customer data and transactions.

For example, six digit PIN codes were replaced by passwords to login to EastLink accounts at the EastLink website.

The first time a customer login is made to an EastLink account at the EastLink website using a correct six digit PIN code, the website now requires the customer to immediately create a new password for the EastLink account. The new password will need to satisfy minimum criteria, such as a minimum length.

Customers have readily adapted to these changes, and since introduced, no ECA cases have been raised in relation to them.

EastLink has now embarked on further strengthening the security of account login, with work now started on the introduction of "multi factor authentication".

If you are experiencing financial hardship and are seeking assistance in relation to any EastLink debt, please phone EastLink's customer services team in Melbourne on (03) 9955 1400 during business hours Monday to Friday (closed public holidays).

For more information about EastLink's hardship policy (which outlines available options and how to request hardship assistance), visit www.eastlink.com.au/hardship.

For more information about the role of the EastLink Customer Advocate, visit www.eastlink.com.au/customeradvocate.

Doug Spencer-Roy
EastLink Customer Advocate



2. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASES DURING THE QUARTER

2.1 CASES RAISED

Approximately half of the cases raised during Q1 2023 related to the following:

- > toll invoices (31%)
- > hardship assistance (16%).

Table 1: ECA cases raised

ECA CASES RAISED	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Q1 2023
Toll invoice	5	3	7	15
Toll invoice SMS/email message	1	0	0	1
Toll invoice payment	1	0	0	1
Account payment	1	0	0	1
Account charge	0	1	1	2
Account charge for a sold vehicle	1	0	0	1
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	0	0	1	1
Account closure	0	2	3	5
Tags	0	0	2	2
Tolling class	0	0	1	1
Customer service	3	2	1	6
Hardship assistance	1	5	3	9
Third party scam	2	0	3	5
Infringements (fines)	0	2	1	3
Debris damage	0	1	0	1
Signage	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	16	16	23	55

2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q1 2023 have been closed.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

ECA CASES CLOSED	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Q1 2023
Q1 2023 cases closed (as at date of report)	16	16	23	55
Q1 2023 cases still open (as at date of report)	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	16	16	23	55

2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 47% of cases although EastLink was not at fault and there was no valid complaint, the EastLink Customer Advocate arranged for EastLink's customer service team to assist the customer with their predicament via expedited service.

16% of cases were fully upheld, and a further 13% of cases were partially upheld.

In 22% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable.

In a single case, the customer was referred to another tollway operator or other body.

Table 3: ECA case findings

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Q1 2023
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	7	8	11	26
Complaint upheld	3	0	6	9
Complaint partially upheld	2	3	2	7
Complaint rejected	4	4	4	12
Complaint referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	16	16	23	55

Most cases involved complaints about modest sums – in particular, the fee component of a toll invoice but not the toll component, or the image processing fee component but not the toll component. In general, it is not the trip or toll that is disputed, but whether the trip is able to be charged to a valid account or pass, or if the trip is subject to additional fees such as the toll invoice fee or image processing fee.

This means that the refunds and credits awarded can vary significantly from month to month, depending on whether there are any of the more unusual, higher value cases during the month, and whether those complaints are upheld or rejected.

Table 4: ECA case findings – refunds & credits

ECA CASE FINDINGS – REFUNDS & CREDITS	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Q1 2023
Refunds & credits awarded	\$115	\$68	\$950	\$1,133

2.4 ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE CASES

The average elapsed time to close ECA cases during the quarter was 2.3 calendar days. This elapsed time metric (calendar days) includes days on weekends and public holidays, and is synonymous with customer wait time.

Table 5: Elapsed time to close ECA cases

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Q1 2023
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	2.3	2.6	2.2	2.3

Case Study – customer’s vehicle towed & impounded following medical emergency

A hospital social worker contacted EastLink on behalf of a customer (an in-patient at the hospital) seeking waiver of impounding fees for the customer’s vehicle.

Investigation revealed that the customer had experienced a medical emergency while travelling on EastLink.

The customer had been transported directly from EastLink to hospital by Ambulance Victoria, leaving the customer’s unattended vehicle on the EastLink roadside.

The customer’s vehicle was towed and impounded under normal operating procedures when the hospital contacted EastLink to advise that the customer would be unable to collect the vehicle from EastLink.

However, the customer had remained an in-patient at the hospital for an extended period. For genuine medical reasons, the customer was unable to arrange for removal of the vehicle from the towing/impound service provider, either directly or via a family member or friend.

Significant impound fees had accumulated during the customer’s extended in-patient hospital treatment.

Following the contact to the ECA by the hospital social worker, EastLink’s operations team worked with the towing/impound service provider to arrange for the fees to be waived and the vehicle was made available to the customer upon release from hospital.

3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

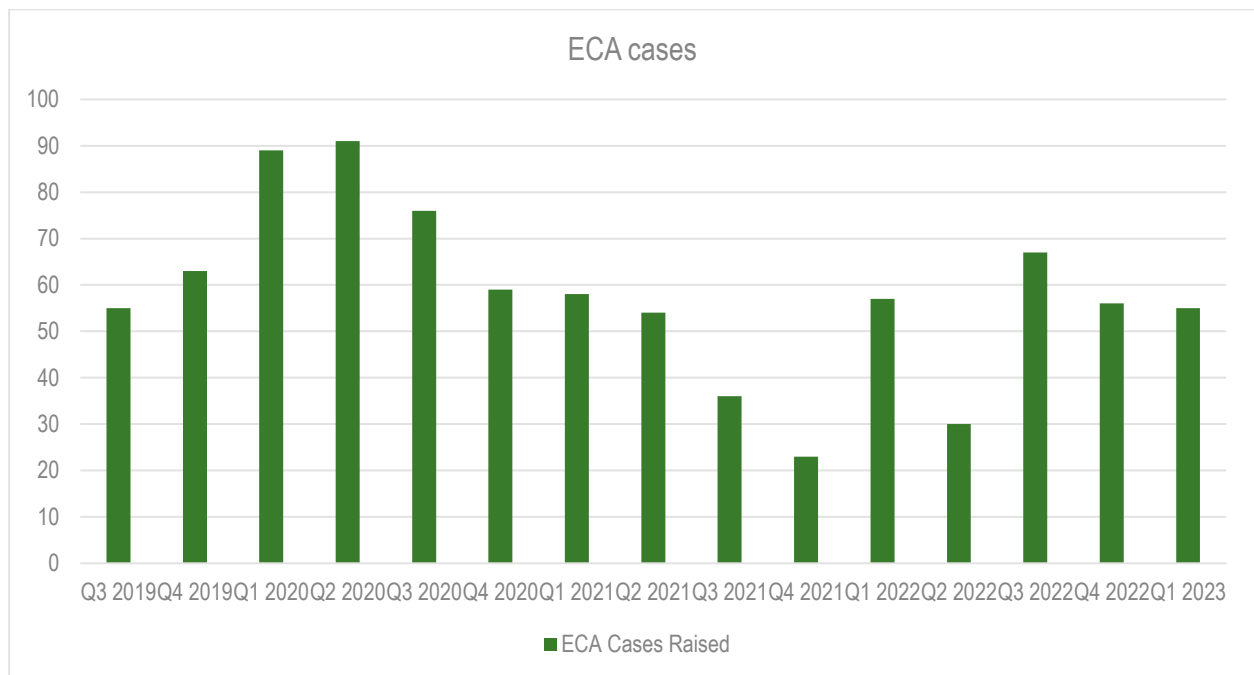
3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

Chart 1 shows the number of cases raised in each quarter since the commencement of the EastLink Customer Advocate role at the start of Q3 2019.

The chart shows a wave of additional cases during the first half of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first emerged and impacted the economy. It also indicates that the nominal case rate is in the 50 to 60 cases per quarter range.

The number of cases raised in Q1 2023 (55 cases) is therefore within the nominal range.

Chart 1: ECA cases trend



31% of the cases raised during Q1 2023 related to toll invoices, which is a lower proportion than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (44%) – see Table 6.

16% of the cases were raised in relation to hardship assistance, which is a much higher proportion than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (7%). This is attributed to increased financial stress and uncertainty caused by higher inflation, higher interest rates, increased costs of living, and more pressure on household budgets.

9% of the cases were raised in relation to online scams. This is a lower proportion compared to the previous quarter (13%), perhaps indicating that the prevalence of the existing tolling scams has peaked, or awareness of the existing tolling scams has reached sufficient levels to reduce the impact.

5% of the cases were raised in relation to infringements (fines), which is a significantly lower proportion compared to the previous quarter (11%, which was unusually high). The latest figure (5%) is close to the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (4%).

Table 6: ECA cases trend

ECA CASES	2021			2022				2023
	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
Toll invoice	23	16	10	20	15	31	18	15
Toll invoice SMS/email message	1	3	0	2	0	0	0	1

ECA CASES	2021			2022			2023	
Toll invoice payment	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1
Account notice	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account payment	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	1
Account charge	7	1	1	4	4	6	5	2
Account charge for a sold vehicle	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	1
Account charge for an LPN error	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0
Account suspension	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account closure	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	5
Deceased account	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tags	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	2
Tolls	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tolling class	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Trip pass	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0
Rental vehicle toll payment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debt recovery	2	0	0	2	0	1	0	0
Customer service	5	5	4	17	4	10	9	6
Payment options	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Website	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Hardship assistance	8	1	0	2	4	4	4	9
Payment plan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Third party scam	0	0	0	0	0	6	7	5
Infringements (fines)	1	2	1	0	1	2	6	3
Incident response	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debris damage	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
Abandoned vehicle	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Road maintenance	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Signage	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Litter	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Noise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Speed limit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Graffiti	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Landscaping	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
EastLink Trail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wildlife	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Privacy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Problem with another tollway operator	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown (withdrawn, insufficient details)	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Police enquiry	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
TOTAL	54	36	23	57	30	67	56	55

As outlined earlier in section 3.1, the number of cases in Q1 2023 (55 cases) was within the nominal range (50 to 60 cases).

The distribution of these cases across each category of case findings was not particularly unusual in Q1 2023 compared to previous quarters – see Table 7 (overleaf).

Table 7: ECA case findings trend

ECA CASE FINDINGS	2021			2022				2023
	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	20	14	7	24	12	32	28	26
Complaint upheld	13	10	5	17	9	14	9	9
Complaint partially upheld	9	1	6	5	3	13	8	7
Complaint rejected	11	8	5	11	4	8	7	12
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	2	0	0	2	0	2	1
Insufficient details provided	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0
TOTAL	54	36	23	57	30	67	56	55

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q1 2023 (\$1,133) was slightly higher than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$869) – see Table 8.

This confirms that the unusually very low amount for the previous quarter Q4 2022 (\$264) was simply a statistical outlier.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS	2021			2022				2023
	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
Refunds & credits awarded	\$2,103	\$647	\$781	\$690	\$511	\$1,088	\$264	\$1,133

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q1 2023 (2.3 calendar days) was lower than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.7 calendar days) – see Table 9.

Two cases in Q1 2023 took a relatively long time to close (15 calendar days and 14 days respectively):

- > In one of these two cases, the delay was attributed to waiting for a third party tollway operator to provide information to assist with investigation of the case.
- > In the other case, the delay was attributed to waiting for the customer to provide further information that was required for the case investigation and had been requested from the customer.

Excluding these two cases, the average time to close ECA cases during Q1 2023 would fall to just 1.9 calendar days.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	2021			2022				2023
	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	2.1	1.9	2.8	2.3	3.5	3.7	2.4	2.3

4. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE EXAMPLES

This section only shows a very brief summary of each case example. The detailed circumstances of every case are unique, so these case examples should not be read as precedents for other cases.

4.1 CUSTOMER A (BPAY PAYMENT TOOK LONGER THAN EXPECTED)

Customer A complained that BPAY payments initiated on the same day as the due date of a toll invoice may result in an additional fee charged by EastLink if the BPAY funds are not received by EastLink prior to the overdue notice being issued.

Investigation revealed that Customer A has an extensive history of EastLink toll invoices as a result of non-payment of tolls, of which 58% of the toll invoices were paid on time without any overdue notices being issued. In the instances where overdue notices were issued, most were paid online at the EastLink website and only four were paid by BPAY.

In one of the four BPAY overdue notice payments, the EastLink toll invoice due date was 25/12/2022, and although the BPAY payment was initiated on 25/12/2022, EastLink did not receive the payment until 29/12/2022 – an unusually long delay for BPAY payments, which was attributed to a weekend immediately followed by Christmas Day and Boxing Day public holidays. This was a banking delay, not a delay caused by EastLink. An EastLink overdue notice (with a higher toll invoice fee) was issued on the day prior to the BPAY payment being received.

Prior to raising the complaint with the ECA, Customer A had also paid the outstanding amount for the overdue notice directly to EastLink by credit card.

While EastLink did not make an error, as a result of this complaint the overdue component of the toll invoice fee was credited back to the Customer A's credit card.

In addition, the investigation revealed that another recent overdue notice had been paid twice by the customer (once by BPAY and once online at the EastLink website). This over-payment was also credited back to Customer A's credit card.

4.2 CUSTOMER B (VEHICLE ADDED TO LINKT ACCOUNT AFTER TRAVEL ON EASTLINK)

Customer B complained about an infringement penalty notice received from Victoria Police for unpaid travel on EastLink by a vehicle that had been added to a tolling account issued by a third party tollway operator.

Investigation with the third party tollway operator confirmed that the vehicle was added to the account after travel, and that any EastLink travel prior to the vehicle being added to this type of account is not covered by the account.

EastLink had issued a toll invoice and an overdue notice to Customer B which remained unpaid and unchallenged prior to unpaid trip details being passed on to Victoria Police.

The toll invoice and overdue notice both included clear instructions on what needed to be done (payment in full by the due date) and the consequences if that was not done (potential Victoria Police infringement penalty).

The toll invoice and overdue notice also provided specific information for holders of accounts with third party tollway operators (EastLink cannot help with the account, and the account provider cannot help with the EastLink invoice).

No EastLink error was found.

Customer B should contact the account provider for enquiries in relation to the account, and Fines Victoria in relation to any infringement penalty notice.

4.3 CUSTOMER C (CITYLINK PASS NOT VALID FOR TRAVEL ON EASTLINK)

Customer C complained about receiving an EastLink toll invoice even though a 'day pass' had been purchased. Customer C provided a copy of a receipt issued by Transurban Linkt for a CityLink 24 Hour pass.

Although the CityLink 24 Hour pass was purchased from Transurban Linkt on the same date as the EastLink trip, CityLink 24 Hour passes are only valid for travel on Transurban Linkt's CityLink tollway, and are not valid for travel on EastLink.

EastLink did not make an error in issuing the EastLink toll invoice, which should be paid. To provide assistance, the due date was extended.

Customer C should contact Transurban Linkt directly in relation to the CityLink 24 Hour pass (e.g. to seek a refund if no travel had been made on CityLink).

4.4 CUSTOMER D (TOLL INVOICE NOMINATIONS CHALLENGED)

Customer D challenged the nomination to Customer D by a car rental company of two unpaid EastLink trips by two vehicles.

The car rental company did not provide to EastLink any documentary evidence to support the nomination of these unpaid trips to Customer D (e.g. rental documentation or relevant rental periods). Furthermore, in one of the nominations the first name of the nominee was completely incorrect.

EastLink cancelled the two EastLink toll invoices that had been issued to Customer D.

The two unpaid EastLink trips could then be reissued back to the car rental company.

4.5 CUSTOMER E (DOUBLE CHARGING ALLEGED)

Customer E alleged duplication or double-charging of tolls on an EastLink account as well as on an account issued by a third party tollway operator.

Investigation revealed Customer E's two vehicles concurrently on an EastLink account and on a third party tollway account.

(This is not recommended, as it is possible for some tollway trips to be charged to the EastLink account and other tollway trips to be charged to the third party tollway account depending on specific circumstances such as use of tags. This can lead to customer confusion, such as was evident in this case.)

A detailed review of the EastLink trips did not find any duplication of charges. Therefore, no double-charging of EastLink trips had occurred.

EastLink has no visibility of trips on a third party tollway charged to a third party tollway account. This was explained to Customer E, and Customer E was advised to compare the individual trips charged to the EastLink account with the individual trips charged to the third party tollway account.

Customer E had requested closure of the EastLink account shortly before contacting the ECA, solving this source of confusion for Customer E moving forward.

For further information:

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