

EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q3 2023 (1 JULY 2023 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2023)



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1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

9 November 2023

This report covers the Q3 2023 quarterly period (1 July 2023 – 30 September 2023).

The number of cases raised in Q3 2023 (83 cases) is well above the nominal range (50 to 60 cases per quarter), and is the fourth highest number of cases in any quarter to date. This is attributed to continued on-going financial uncertainty and cost of living pressures associated with higher inflation, higher mortgage rates and increased power prices increasing cost of living pressures on households and small businesses.

Despite the relatively large number of ECA cases this quarter, the elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q3 2023 (1.4 calendar days) was less than half of the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.9 calendar days).

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q3 2023 (\$573) was less than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$743).

More than two-thirds of the cases raised during Q3 2023 related to the following:

- > toll invoices (43%) – which is a slightly higher proportion than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (41%)
- > customer service (29%) – which is almost double the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (16%). However, in all of these customer service cases in Q3 2023, the finding was either that the case was simply a request for customer service or (in a small number of cases) a referral to another agency. None of these customer service cases was a valid unresolved complaint.

Protection of customer data continues to be of critical importance.

EastLink is now completing the testing of two-factor authentication for account login, which will further strengthen customer data security. This will apply to all EastLink accounts.

When it launches in late November 2023 (slightly delayed due to rigorous security testing), customers will need to use one of the following methods for two-factor authentication when logging in to their EastLink account:

- > one-time passcode sent in an SMS text message to the mobile phone listed on the EastLink account
- > Microsoft Authenticator
- > Google Authenticator.

Further information about this change has been published on the EastLink website as part of a customer awareness campaign. Account holders who don't have mobile phone numbers listed on their EastLink account have also been contacted directly to encourage them to add their mobile phone number to their EastLink account.

If you are experiencing financial hardship and are seeking assistance in relation to any EastLink debt, please email hardship@connecteast.com.au or 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

More than two-thirds of the cases raised during Q3 2023 related to the following:

- > toll invoices (43%)
- > customer service (29%).

Table 1: ECA cases raised

ECA CASES RAISED	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Q3 2023
Toll invoice	17	10	8	35
Toll invoice communications	0	1	0	1
Account notice	1	0	0	1
Account charge	4	2	3	9
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	2	3	0	5
Account closure	0	1	0	1
Tolls	1	1	0	2
Customer service	6	7	11	24
Website	0	0	1	1
Hardship assistance	1	1	0	2
Third party scam	0	0	1	1
Landscaping, public artworks	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	32	27	24	83

2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q3 2023 have been closed.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

ECA CASES CLOSED	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Q3 2023
Q3 2023 cases closed (as at date of report)	32	27	24	83
Q3 2023 cases still open (as at date of report)	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	32	27	24	83

2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 59% 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.

17% of cases were fully upheld, and a further 6% of cases were partially upheld.

In 14% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable.

In 4% of cases the customer was referred to another tollway operator or other body.

Table 3: ECA case findings

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Q3 2023
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	18	15	16	49
Complaint upheld	6	6	2	14
Complaint partially upheld	3	2	0	5
Complaint rejected	4	2	6	12

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Q3 2023
Complaint referred to another tollway operator etc.	1	2	0	3
TOTAL	32	27	24	83

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	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Q3 2023
Refunds & credits awarded	\$334	\$162	\$77	\$573

2.4 ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE CASES

The average elapsed time to close ECA cases during the quarter was 1.4 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	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Q3 2023
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	1.4	1.1	1.6	1.4

Case Study – two tags and two accounts being used for the same vehicle at the same time

The customer complained about double charging, with the same trips charged to both their EastLink account and an account issued by another tollway operator.

Investigation confirmed that the customer’s vehicle was listed *at the same time* on an EastLink account as well as on an account issued by another tollway operator.

Furthermore, the customer’s vehicle was *at the same time* carrying an EastLink tag as well as a tag issued by the other tollway operator.

However, a detailed analysis of each of the account charges for every EastLink trip indicated that no EastLink toll point charge had been charged twice. Each toll point charge had been charged to only one of the accounts.

No evidence of any double charging was found.

The EastLink account had also been suspended due to non-payment.

The customer was advised to remove their vehicle from one of the accounts and ensure the relevant tag is completely removed from the vehicle.

The customer should also contact EastLink customer services to either remedy the suspension of the EastLink account, or request closure of the EastLink account.

3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

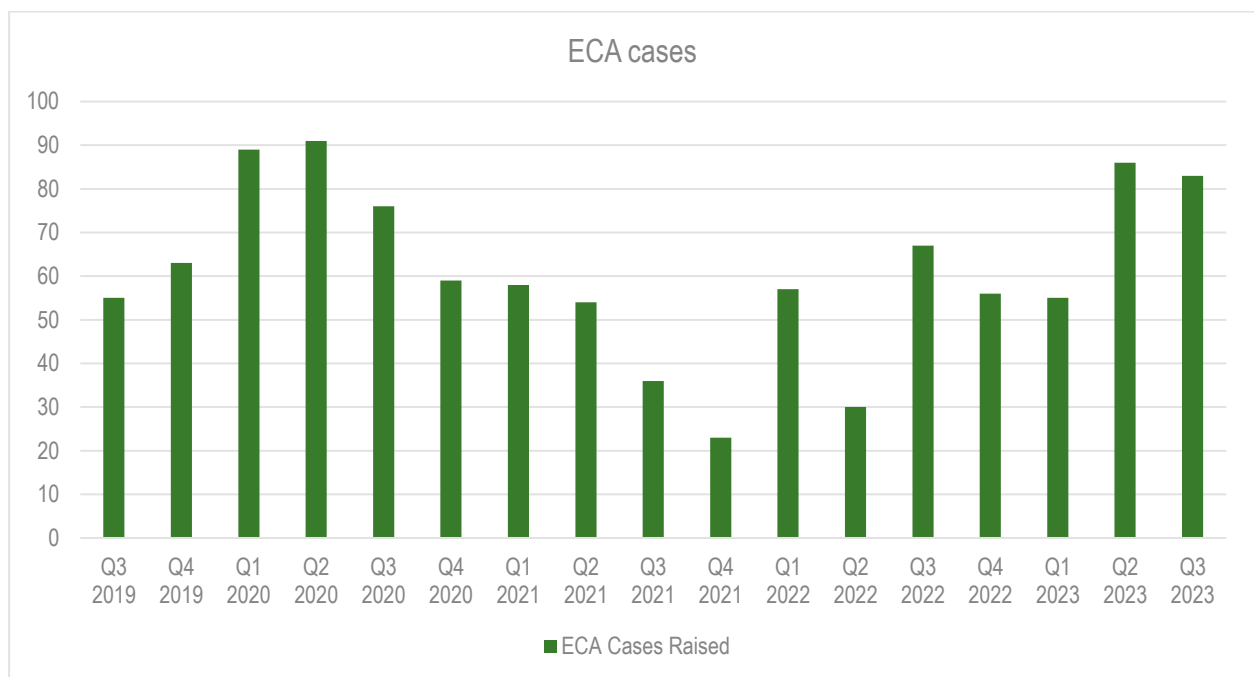
3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

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 Q3 2023 (83 cases) is well above the nominal range and it is the fourth highest on record out of 17 quarters. This is attributed to ongoing financial uncertainty and cost of living pressures associated with higher inflation, higher mortgage rates and increased power prices increasing cost of living pressures on households and small businesses.

Chart 1: ECA cases trend



43% of the cases raised during Q3 2023 related to toll invoices, which is a slightly higher proportion than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (41%) – see Table 6.

29% of the cases were raised in relation to customer service, which is almost double the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (16%). However, there is no indication of a specific customer service failure because, of the 24 cases raised in relation to customer service:

- > 22 of these customer service cases were of finding type “Service expedited (no valid complaint)” – typically a customer contacting the EastLink Customer Advocate with a customer service enquiry rather than an unresolved complaint.
- > 2 of these customer service cases were of finding type “Referral”.
- > None of these customer service cases were of finding type “Complaint upheld”, “Complaint partially upheld” or “Complaint rejected”.

Only one of the cases in Q3 2023 was raised in relation to online third party scams. Compared to an average of 6 per quarter between Q3 2022 and Q1 2023, this confirms that the prevalence of the existing tolling scams has passed and scammers have moved on to new topics, or awareness of the existing tolling scams has reached sufficient levels to reduce the impact.

Table 6: ECA cases trend

ECA CASES	2021	2022				2023		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Toll invoice	10	20	15	31	18	15	35	35
Toll invoice communications	0	2	0	0	0	1	2	1
Toll invoice payment	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Account notice	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Account payment	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0
Account charge	1	4	4	6	5	2	6	9
Account charge for a sold vehicle	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	1	2	0	1	0	1	3	5
Account charge for an LPN error	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account suspension	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account closure	0	1	0	0	1	5	4	1
Deceased account	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tags	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0
Tolls	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Tolling class	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Trip pass	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	0
Rental vehicle toll payment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debt recovery	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	0
Customer service	4	17	4	10	9	6	11	24
Payment options	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Website	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Hardship assistance	0	2	4	4	4	9	7	2
Payment plan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Third party scam	0	0	0	6	7	5	0	1
Infringements (fines)	1	0	1	2	6	3	4	0
Incident response	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debris damage	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
Abandoned vehicle	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Road maintenance	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Signage	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Litter	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	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, public artworks	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
EastLink Trail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wildlife	0	1	0	0	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)	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Police enquiry	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
CCTV request	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Insurance claim	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
TOTAL	23	57	30	67	56	55	86	83

As outlined earlier in section 3.1, the number of cases in Q3 2023 (83 cases) was well above the nominal range (50-60 cases). The distribution of these cases across each category of case findings was not particularly unusual in Q3 2023 compared to previous quarters – see Table 7.

Table 7: ECA case findings trend

ECA CASE FINDINGS	2021	2022				2023		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	7	24	12	32	28	26	45	49
Complaint upheld	5	17	9	14	9	9	16	14
Complaint partially upheld	6	5	3	13	8	7	9	5
Complaint rejected	5	11	4	8	7	12	10	12
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	0	2	0	2	1	6	3
Insufficient details provided	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
TOTAL	23	57	30	67	56	55	86	83

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q3 2023 (\$573) was less than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$743) – see Table 8.

However, the Q3 2023 figure re-confirms that the unusually very low amount for the earlier quarter Q4 2022 (\$264) was simply a statistical outlier.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS	2021	2022				2023		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Refunds & credits awarded	\$781	\$690	\$511	\$1,088	\$264	\$1,133	\$736	\$573

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q3 2023 (1.4 calendar days) was less than half of the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.9 calendar days) – see Table 9.

Furthermore, unlike previous quarters, no cases in Q3 2023 took a relatively long time to close.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	2021	2022				2023		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	2.8	2.3	3.5	3.7	2.4	2.3	3.0	1.4

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 (VEHICLE NOT ADDED TO TAG ACCOUNT)

Customer A's vehicle had not been added to their EastLink tag account. The tag in the vehicle was not detected during one EastLink trip. As the vehicle was not listed on the account, this resulted in an EastLink toll invoice and then an EastLink overdue notice being issued to Customer A. Customer A had contacted the EastLink customer service team about the EastLink overdue notice. Customer A was advised that the EastLink overdue notice had to be paid before the vehicle could be added to the EastLink account. An offer to waive the overdue fee (but not the toll invoice fee or VicRoads lookup fee) was also made though not accepted by Customer A. Customer A's EastLink account has otherwise been in good order – with automatic payment, no contact history, and a significant account value. Customer A's complaint was upheld: the EastLink overdue notice (\$17.84) was completely cancelled, and the vehicle was added to Customer A's account.

4.2 CUSTOMER B (CLONED VEHICLE)

Customer B provided a statutory declaration about the 'cloning' of their vehicle and disputing recent EastLink toll invoices. A review of toll point images and toll invoices for this licence plate number confirmed vehicle cloning – there were several clear differences between Customer B's vehicle which had travelled on EastLink earlier, and the recently travelling vehicle. It was found that two toll invoices which had already been paid by Customer B should be refunded (\$38.37 refund). Two further unpaid toll invoices were cancelled (\$49.18). Customer B was reminded about EastLink toll invoices that were outstanding for other vehicles.

4.3 CUSTOMER C (DISPUTED TRAVEL)

Customer C complained that an EastLink overdue notice had been issued even though Customer C's vehicle had not travelled on EastLink. In a call with EastLink's customer service team, Customer C had confirmed sun damage on the roof and bonnet of Customer C's vehicle. Upon review of this unresolved complaint, toll point images clearly showed distinctive sun damage. Toll point images showing the distinctive sun damage were provided to Customer C. Customer C was asked to provide images of Customer C's vehicle or a statutory declaration if Customer C wished to continue to dispute the EastLink overdue notice. No images or statutory declaration were subsequently provided by Customer C.

4.4 CUSTOMER D (TAG FAILURE AND IMAGE PROCESSING FEES)

Customer D complained about image processing fees charged to their EastLink tag account. EastLink's customer service team had already provided a partial refund of image processing fees (\$6.62). However, Customer D should also have been advised that EastLink would review further image processing fee charges dependent on the outcome of testing the tag upon its return to EastLink. The tag was returned to EastLink and found to be faulty. The remaining image processing fees were refunded (\$19.33).

4.5 CUSTOMER E (REFERRAL TO ANOTHER TOLLWAY OPERATOR)

Customer E complained that a final toll invoice had been received even though the original toll invoice had not been received. Investigation revealed that the final toll invoice was not an EastLink toll invoice. The final toll invoice was issued by another tollway operator - confirmed using the other tollway operator's website. Customer E was referred to the other tollway operator.

For further information:

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