

EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q3 2024 (1 JULY 2024 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2024)



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1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

9 October 2024

This report covers the Q3 2024 quarterly period (1 July 2024 – 30 September 2024).

The number of cases raised in Q3 2024 (22 cases) was significantly lower than the nominal case rate (50 to 60 cases per quarter), and in fact the lowest number recorded for any quarter to date.

The elapsed time to close EastLink Customer Advocate (ECA) cases during Q3 2024 (2.5 calendar days) was similar to the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.4 calendar days).

Three-quarters of the cases raised during Q3 2024 related to the following:

- > Toll invoices (50%) – which is higher than the longer term average for this case type over the preceding seven quarters (43%). However, there is no indication of a specific or systemic customer service failure contributing to this increase, and the 11 cases raised in relation to toll invoices during Q3 2024 had a broad range of outcomes
- > Account charges (27%) – which is higher than the longer term average for this case type over the preceding seven quarters (12%). However, there is no indication of a specific or systemic customer service failure contributing to this increase, and the 7 cases raised in relation to account charges during Q3 2024 had a broad range of outcomes.

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q3 2024 (\$905) was 11% lower than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$1,018).

The cases studies in this quarterly report prompt some important reminders for tollway users:

- > When you dispose of a vehicle, promptly remove the vehicle from your account.
- > Check your account statements – the vehicles listed on the account and the account charges.
- > Don't continue to travel on tollways while your account is suspended.
- > Listen to your tag beeps (four beeps means the account is suspended and you should contact the issuer of the account).
- > Don't ignore toll invoices and overdue notices – they won't magically disappear.

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 (excluding 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

Three-quarters of the cases raised during Q3 2024 related to the following:

- > Toll invoices (50%)
- > Account charges (27%)

Table 1: ECA cases raised

ECA CASES RAISED	Jul 2024	Aug 2024	Sep 2024	Q3 2024
Toll invoice	5	3	2	10
Toll invoice communications	0	1	0	1
Account charge	1	0	3	4
Account charge for a sold vehicle	1	0	1	2
Tags	1	0	0	1
Customer service	1	0	0	1
Website	1	0	0	1
Hardship assistance	0	1	0	1
Landscaping, public artworks	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	10	6	6	22

2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q3 2024 have been closed. The last of these cases was closed on 4/10/2024, with the customer notified of the ECA's finding on the same day.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

ECA CASES CLOSED	Jul 2024	Aug 2024	Sep 2024	Q3 2024
Q3 2024 cases closed (as at date of report)	10	6	6	0
Q3 2024 cases still open (as at date of report)	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	10	6	6	22

2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 36% of cases during Q2 2024, although EastLink was not at fault and there was no valid complaint, the ECA arranged for EastLink's customer service team to assist the customer with their predicament via expedited service.

27% of cases in the quarter were fully upheld, and a further 18% of cases were partially upheld.

In 18% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable.

No customers were referred to another tollway operator or other body.

No customers provided insufficient details to allow the case to be investigated (despite specific information requested and reminders sent).

Table 3: ECA case findings

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Jul 2024	Aug 2024	Sep 2024	Q3 2024
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	5	3	0	8
Complaint upheld	1	1	4	6
Complaint partially upheld	1	2	1	4

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Jul 2024	Aug 2024	Sep 2024	Q3 2024
Complaint rejected	3	0	1	4
Complaint referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	0	0	0
Insufficient details provided	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	10	6	6	22

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 usually 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 2024	Aug 2024	Sep 2024	Q3 2024
Refunds & credits awarded	\$184	\$77	\$644	\$905

2.4 ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE CASES

The average elapsed time to close ECA cases during the quarter was 2.5 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 2024	Aug 2024	Sep 2024	Q3 2024
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	2.0	1.2	4.5	2.5

Case Study – failure to remove vehicles from EastLink account

The customer contacted the ECA to complain about toll charges on an EastLink account for two vehicles that the customer had disposed of years earlier. The customer had removed the vehicles from a tolling account with another tollway operator and claimed that this should have resulted in the vehicles being removed from the EastLink account as well.

While not recommended to have multiple tolling accounts for the same vehicle, there will be no problems provided the customer maintains each account properly and in accordance with the terms and conditions that apply to each account.

EastLink has never stated that removing a vehicle from a tolling account with another tollway operator will automatically remove it from an EastLink account.

The EastLink account terms and conditions include the customer responsibility to remove a vehicle from the account within three business days of vehicle disposal.

In this case, 9 separate account statements had been issued to customer’s correct email address. Each account statement included a prominent warning to check the list of vehicles on the account as shown on the statement. Each account statement listed all the toll charges for the two vehicles.

The travel on another tollway had already been paid by EastLink to that tollway operator, and is not refundable.

Although there was no error by EastLink, the EastLink travel was refunded as a gesture of goodwill.

3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

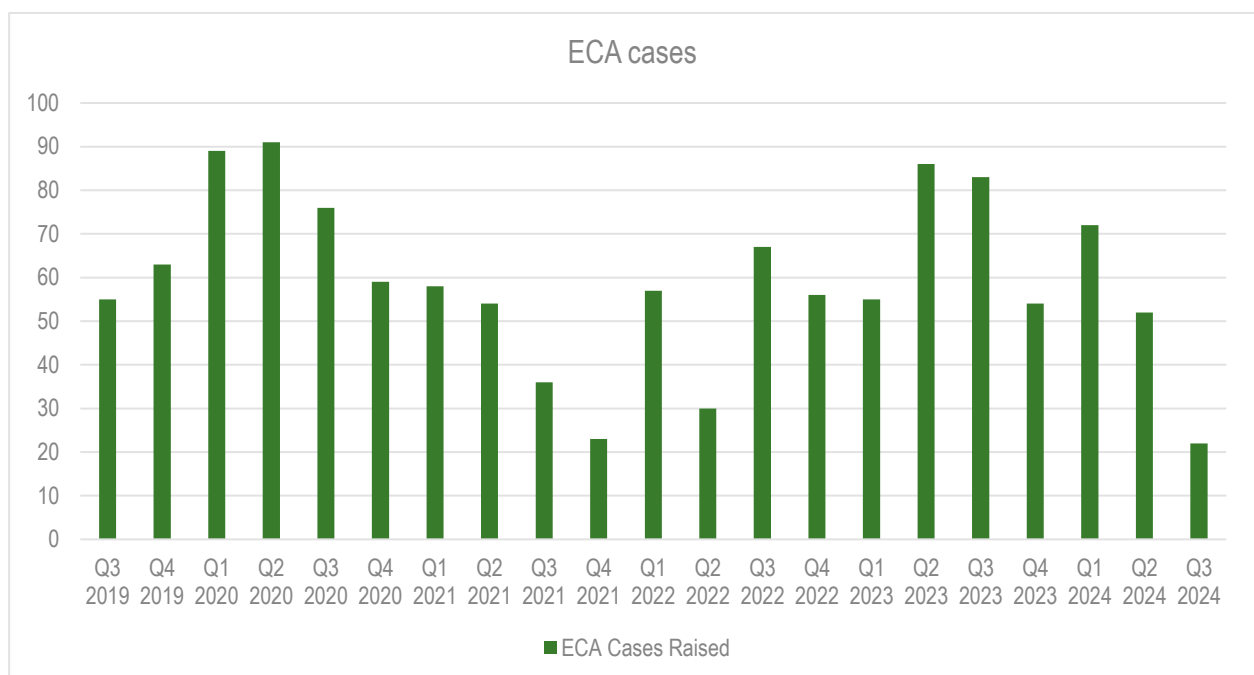
3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

Chart 1 shows the number of cases raised in each quarter since the commencement of the ECA 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. More recent waves in the middle quarters of 2023 and in Q1 2024 are attributed to increased cost of living pressures. The chart also indicates that the nominal case rate is in the 50 to 60 cases per quarter range.

The number of cases raised in Q3 2024 (22 cases) was much lower than the nominal case rate, and in fact the lowest number recorded for any quarter to date.

Chart 1: ECA cases trend



50% of the cases raised during Q3 2024 related to toll invoices, which is higher than the longer term average for this case type over the preceding seven quarters (43%) – see Table 6.

However, there is no indication of a specific or systemic customer service failure contributing to this increase. Of the 11 cases raised in relation to toll invoices during Q3 2024:

- > 3 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “complaint upheld”
- > 2 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “complaint partially upheld”
- > 3 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “service expedited (no valid complaint)”
- > 3 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “complaint rejected”

A further 27% of the cases raised during Q3 2024 related to account charges, which is higher than the longer term average for this case type over the preceding seven quarters (12%). However, there is no indication of a specific or systemic customer service failure contributing to this increase. Of the 7 cases raised in relation to customer service during Q3 2024, 3 were of finding type “complaint upheld”, 2 were of finding type “complaint partially upheld”, 1 was of finding type “service expedited (no valid complaint)”, and 1 was of finding type “complaint rejected”.

Table 6: ECA cases trend

ECA CASES	2022	2023				2024		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Toll invoice	18	15	35	35	31	39	15	10
Toll invoice communications	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	1
Toll invoice payment	0	1	1	0	0	3	0	0
Account notice	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Account payment	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	0
Account charge	5	2	6	9	5	2	2	4
Account charge for a sold vehicle	0	1	1	0	1	1	6	2
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	0	1	3	5	2	1	1	0
Account charge for an LPN error	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Account suspension	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account closure	1	5	4	1	0	1	1	0
Deceased account	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tags	0	2	1	0	2	1	0	1
Tolls	0	0	2	2	1	2	0	0
Tolling class	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trip pass	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	0
Debt recovery	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Customer service	9	6	11	24	4	8	12	1
Payment options	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Website	1	0	0	1	3	4	2	1
Hardship assistance	4	9	7	2	1	0	3	1
Payment plan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Third party scam	7	5	0	1	0	3	2	0
Infringements (fines)	6	3	4	0	1	3	2	0
Incident response	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debris damage	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Abandoned vehicle	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Road maintenance	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0
Signage	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Litter	0	0	1	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, public artworks	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
EastLink Trail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wildlife	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Privacy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown (withdrawn, insufficient details)	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Police enquiry	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CCTV request	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Insurance claim	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	56	55	86	83	54	72	52	22

As outlined earlier in section 3.1, the number of cases in Q3 2024 (22 cases) much lower than the nominal case rate (50-60 cases per quarter), and in fact the lowest number recorded for any quarter to date.

The distribution of these cases across each category of case findings was not particularly unusual in Q3 2024 compared to previous quarters – see Table 7.

Table 7: ECA case findings trend

ECA CASE FINDINGS	2022	2023				2024		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	28	26	45	49	18	31	27	8
Complaint upheld	9	9	16	14	9	13	7	6
Complaint partially upheld	8	7	9	5	14	14	9	4
Complaint rejected	7	12	10	12	11	14	6	4
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	2	1	6	3	1	0	2	0
Insufficient details provided	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
TOTAL	56	55	86	83	54	72	52	22

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q3 2024 (\$905) was 11% lower than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$1,018) – see Table 8.

However, the mean average refund/credit per case during Q3 2024 (\$41) was more than double the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$17). During the quarter there were 3 cases which received refunds in the range \$100-\$199, and 1 case which received a refund in the range \$200-\$299. This is a higher proportion of cases in the quarter to receive larger refunds compared to normal.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS	2022	2023				2024		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Refunds & credits awarded	\$264	\$1,133	\$736	\$573	\$1,619	\$1,307	\$1,492	\$905
Mean average per case (all cases, rounded)	\$5	\$21	\$9	\$7	\$30	\$18	\$29	\$41

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q3 2024 (2.5 calendar days) was similar to the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.4 calendar days) – see Table 9.

No cases in Q3 2024 took an unusually long time to close.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	2022	2023				2024		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	2.4	2.3	3.0	1.4	2.5	2.8	2.1	2.5

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 (TOLLING ACCOUNT FREQUENTLY SUSPENDED)

Customer A complained about receiving invoices from EastLink even though they have an account. Investigation revealed that Customer A has a tolling account with another tollway operator. Customer A's tolling account was suspended for two weeks. Customer A made 15 trips on EastLink while the account was suspended. This resulted in EastLink issuing 5 EastLink toll invoices, none of which were paid and there was no contact with EastLink. Accordingly, EastLink issued 5 EastLink overdue notices. Following the complaint to the ECA, the other tollway operator informed EastLink that the account had been suspended five times in the past 12 months and their credit management team have tried multiple times to contact Customer A to arrange payment without success. There was no error by EastLink. The ECA provided an explanation of the outstanding debt, extended the Due Dates to provide more time to pay, and provided information about payment plans and hardship assistance.

4.2 CUSTOMER B (TAG MAY NOT HAVE BEEN RECEIVED)

Customer B claims not to have received an EastLink tag recently declared LOST by an EastLink customer service operator. Investigation revealed that the tag was issued to Customer B's account in late 2017 and sent by post. However the tag has never been detected on any tollway. There is no evidence of delivery. The EastLink account had been operated well by Customer B with few contacts over the account history. Accordingly, the tag status was changed from LOST to STOLEN so that the lost tag fee (\$40) will never be applied to the account for this tag.

4.3 CUSTOMER C (TOLLING ACCOUNT FREQUENTLY SUSPENDED – FINES ISSUED)

Customer C complained about receiving several fines for EastLink travel even though they have an account with another tollway operator. Investigation revealed that the account has been suspended 42 times since 2016 (not short suspensions). Customer C travelled 11 times recently while the account was suspended. This resulted in EastLink issuing 7 EastLink toll invoices, none of which were paid and there was no contact with EastLink. Accordingly, EastLink issued 7 EastLink overdue notices. There was still no payment or contact with EastLink. Some trips were referred to Victoria Police / Fines Victoria for potential infringement. There was no error by EastLink. The ECA provided an explanation of the outstanding debt and explained why the fines had been issued, and provided information about payment plans and hardship assistance. Customer C responded by claiming the PO Box contact details (provided by VicRoads and used for posting the EastLink invoices) was no longer in use. Although failure to update contact details with VicRoads is not an EastLink error, as a gesture of goodwill, the overdue fee on each of the 7 EastLink overdue notices was waived (total amount waived \$43.69).

4.4 CUSTOMER D (ERROR WHEN PURCHASING TRIP PASS)

Customer D complained about receiving an EastLink toll invoice even though an EastLink trip pass had been purchased. Investigation revealed that Customer D had purchased an EastLink trip pass via the EastLink website on the day following travel. However, Customer D had transposed two digits for the vehicle licence plate number. This meant the trip pass was not matched to the trip and an EastLink toll invoice was issued. There was no error by EastLink. As this was a customer error made in good faith, the trip pass was matched to the EastLink toll invoice, and the EastLink toll invoice was no longer payable. Explanation provided to Customer D.

For further information:

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