

EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q1 2020 (1 JANUARY 2020 – 31 MARCH 2020)



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1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

3 April 2020

This report covers the Q1 2020 quarterly period (1 January 2020 – 31 March 2020).

In Q1 2020, 89 cases were raised with me, which is an increase of 41% compared to the previous quarter.

Although the number of cases increased by 41% compared to the previous quarter, the number of complaints that were fully upheld or partially upheld only increased from 27 to 29 (+7%).

Accordingly, the increased number of complaints does not, in my view, suggest any deterioration of service.

In 44 of the 89 cases this quarter, although I found that EastLink was not at fault and the complaint should be rejected, I arranged for EastLink's customer service team to assist the customer with their predicament.

52% of all the cases raised with me during the quarter related to EastLink toll invoices. This is a higher proportion than in previous quarters. I note that EastLink is working on a new design for toll invoices and overdue notices, and I have been involved in that process. This included seeking review comments from a major community legal centre. Hopefully this will help reduce complaints about toll invoices.

Even with the significantly increased case load during Q1 2020, the average elapsed time to close each case has steadily decreased from 4.0 days in Q3 2019, to 2.8 days in Q4 2019, to 2.2 days in Q1 2020. This is an excellent outcome for customers.

As I write this, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a huge impact on our way of life and economy, with the introduction and ratcheting up of social distancing measures during March 2020.

There is no evidence (so far) of any change in the number of complaints to the EastLink Customer Advocate arising from the impact of the pandemic. For example, the number of complaints logged in March 2020 was 24% lower than February 2020, but 17% higher than January 2020.

Regrettably, I expect that the economic impact of the pandemic will inevitably result in more EastLink customers experiencing financial hardship.

If you have been directly affected by the Coronavirus pandemic and are seeking additional assistance from EastLink, 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

52% of the cases raised during Q1 2020 related to toll invoices.

Table 1: ECA cases raised

ECA CASES RAISED	Jan 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Q1 2020
Enquiry (service request, not a complaint)	1	1	0	2
Toll invoice	9	20	15	44
Toll invoice SMS messages	0	1	0	1
Toll invoice payment	0	1	0	1
Account charge	0	1	1	2
Account charge for a sold vehicle	2	0	2	4
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle or cloned vehicle	1	1	1	3
Account payment	3	0	1	4
Account closure	1	0	0	1
Deceased account	0	0	1	1
Tags	2	0	0	2
Tolls	0	1	0	1
Rental vehicle toll payment	1	0	0	1
Customer service	4	8	1	13
Hardship assistance	0	0	1	1
Payment plan	0	0	1	1
Infringements (fines)	0	2	2	4
Landscaping	0	1	1	2
Police search	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	24	37	28	89

2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q1 2020 have been closed.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

ECA CASES CLOSED	Jan 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Q1 2020
Q1 2020 cases closed (as at date of report)	24	37	28	89
Q1 2020 cases still open (as at date of report)	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	24	37	28	89

2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 49% of cases although EastLink was not at fault and there was no valid complaint, I arranged for EastLink's customer service team to assist the customer with their predicament. 17% of cases were fully upheld, and a further 16% of cases were partially upheld. In 16% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable. 2% of cases were referred to another body.

Table 3: ECA case findings

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Jan 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Q1 2020
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	10	17	17	44
Complaint upheld	6	7	2	15
Complaint partially upheld	4	5	5	14
Complaint rejected	4	7	3	14
Referred (e.g. to another tollway operator or ombudsan)	0	1	1	2
TOTAL	24	37	28	89

Most cases involved complaints about modest sums – in particular, the fee component of a toll invoice but not the toll component. (In general, with toll invoice complaints, it is not the trip or toll that is in doubt, but whether the trip is able to be charged to a valid account.)

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 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Q1 2020
Refunds & credits awarded	\$767	\$266	\$674	\$1,707

2.4 ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE CASES

The average elapsed time to close ECA cases during the quarter was 2.2 days. This elapsed time includes weekend days and public holidays.

The figure for January 2020 was impacted due to three unrelated cases that required more complex investigation. Excluding those three cases, the average elapsed time to close cases in January 2020 was 1.9 days.

Table 5: Elapsed time to close ECA cases

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	Jan 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Q1 2020
Average time to close cases (days)	3.2	2.2	1.5	2.2

Case Study – customer errors result in toll invoices being issued correctly

EastLink toll invoices were issued correctly as the customer's vehicle was not linked to a tolling account.

Following that, the vehicle was linked to the customer's third party tolling account, however the account was suspended due to non-payment.

EastLink correctly sent all the toll invoices to the registered owner of the vehicle at the owner's registered address in WA.

However, the owner had moved to Victoria but had not updated their address with the relevant vehicle registration authorities.

All EastLink toll invoices and overdues remained unpaid.

Following the complaint to the EastLink Customer Advocate, the overdue fees were waived and a payment plan was offered for the outstanding debt.

The customer was also advised to contact Fines Victoria regarding the fines that had been issued, and to contact the provider of the tolling account to ensure the account details were up to date.

3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

In Q1 2020, 89 cases were raised with me, which is an increase of 41% compared to the previous quarter – see Table 6.

Although the number of cases increased by 41% compared to the previous quarter, the number of complaints that were fully upheld or partially upheld only increased from 27 to 29 (+7%) – see Table 7.

Accordingly, the increased number of complaints does not, in my view, suggest any deterioration of service.

Table 6: ECA cases trend

ECA CASES	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020
Enquiry (service request, not a complaint)	5	1	2	-	-	-
Toll invoice	24	27	44	-	-	-
Toll invoice SMS messages	0	0	1	-	-	-
Toll invoice payment	0	0	1	-	-	-
Account notice	1	2	0	-	-	-
Account payment	2	0	4	-	-	-
Account charge	1	2	2	-	-	-
Account charge for a sold vehicle	1	2	4	-	-	-
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	0	3	3	-	-	-
Account charge for an LPN error	1	0	0	-	-	-
Account suspension	0	1	0	-	-	-
Account closure	1	0	1	-	-	-
Deceased account	0	0	1	-	-	-
Tags	2	0	2	-	-	-
Tolls	0	1	1	-	-	-
Tolling class	0	1	0	-	-	-
Trip pass	1	2	0	-	-	-
Rental vehicle toll payment	4	2	1	-	-	-
Debt recovery	1	1	0	-	-	-
Customer service	2	7	13	-	-	-
Website	0	3	0	-	-	-
Hardship assistance	0	2	1	-	-	-
Payment plan	0	0	1	-	-	-
Infringements (fines)	2	3	4	-	-	-
Incident response	0	1	0	-	-	-
Debris damage	1	0	0	-	-	-
Signage	1	0	0	-	-	-
Litter	1	0	0	-	-	-
Landscaping	0	2	2	-	-	-
EastLink Trail	1	0	0	-	-	-
Privacy	1	0	0	-	-	-
Problem with another tollway operator	1	0	0	-	-	-
Unknown (e.g. customer withdrew case)	1	0	0	-	-	-
Police search	0	0	1	-	-	-
TOTAL	55	63	89	-	-	-

Table 7: ECA case findings trend

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	21	25	44	-	-	-
Complaint upheld	13	9	15	-	-	-
Complaint partially upheld	12	18	14	-	-	-
Complaint rejected	8	11	14	-	-	-
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	1	0	2	-	-	-
TOTAL	55	63	89	-	-	-

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q1 2020 was higher than previous quarters as a result of five of the more unusual, higher value cases being upheld during the quarter. Excluding those five cases, the refunds and credits would have amounted to \$416 during Q1 2020.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020
Refunds & credits awarded	\$738	\$590	\$1,707	-	-	-

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q1 2020 was the lowest on record. This is despite the number of ECA cases during Q1 2020 being the highest on record.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020
Average time to close cases (days)	4.0	2.8	2.2	-	-	-

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 (TOLL INVOICE)

Customer A collected a loan vehicle from a car service location, some hours after the vehicle made a trip on EastLink.

The EastLink toll invoice was correctly sent to the car service location. However, the car service location incorrectly nominated customer A as the driver of the vehicle.

EastLink forwarded the toll invoice to customer A. No action was taken by customer A, and EastLink sent an overdue notice to customer A.

Customer A complained to the EastLink Customer Advocate. Following the complaint, EastLink waived the overdue notice in full.

4.2 CUSTOMER B (TOLL INVOICE)

A technical error by another toll road operator resulted in a vehicle not being validated for EastLink travel even though customer B had linked the vehicle to the tolling account issued by that other toll road operator.

EastLink issued a large number of toll invoices as a result of this error.

Following the complaint, EastLink cancelled the toll invoices, and supported the other toll road operator's request to the relevant state authority to cancel infringement penalty notices that had been issued as a result of toll invoices not being paid by their due date prior to the complaint being made.

4.3 CUSTOMER C (TOLL INVOICE)

Customer C complained about toll invoices being nominated to him.

Upon receipt of the complaint, the EastLink Customer Advocate contacted each of the three separate entities that had nominated toll invoices to customer C. There was a clear pattern: each entity had in turn rented a vehicle to customer C to allow customer C to provide Uber services; customer C had not paid for tolls, resulting in toll invoices being sent to each entity; and each entity nominated customer C as the driver of the vehicle.

Evidence was provided to the EastLink Customer Advocate, including copies of a rental agreement and an online conversation about the return of a vehicle and concern from the vehicle renter about the EastLink toll invoices being received.

Accordingly, customer C's complaint was rejected.

4.4 CUSTOMER D (TOLL INVOICE)

Customer D did not link their vehicle to the interstate tolling account correctly. The interstate tolling account was also frequently suspended due to non-payment. In addition, EastLink toll point images showed that customer D's tolling tag was not installed in the vehicle correctly.

As a result of these errors by customer D, EastLink correctly issued toll invoices. The toll invoices were ignored by customer D and overdue notices were issued by EastLink.

Upon complaint to the EastLink Customer Advocate, it was determined that no error had been made by EastLink.

In addition, prior history of these same issues was found for customer D, as well as a similar complaint by customer D to EastLink some months previously at which time customer D was advised how to correctly use their tolling account and tolling tag to avoid toll invoices.

Accordingly, customer D's complaint was rejected.

4.5 CUSTOMER E (TOLL INVOICE SMS MESSAGE)

Customer E complained about an EastLink toll invoice being sent to an incorrect mobile phone.

The EastLink Customer Advocate determined that the vehicle had made the unpaid trip on EastLink.

However, an out of date mobile phone number was provided by VicRoads to EastLink for the vehicle.

Following the complaint, EastLink removed the phone number from its records and advised VicRoads about the error in the VicRoads database.

4.6 CUSTOMER F (TOLL INVOICE)

Customer F complained about an EastLink toll invoice and overdue notice being sent to her.

Following the complaint, the EastLink Customer Advocate sent to customer F the images captured at the EastLink toll points. Customer F responded with photographs of her vehicle.

The vehicle seen on EastLink and customer F's vehicle both shared the same licence plate number. However, the vehicles were different (same make, however one was a saloon while the other was a hatchback/SUV). Customer F's vehicle had apparently been 'cloned'.

Accordingly, the overdue notice was cancelled by EastLink, and customer F was advised to contact VicRoads regarding the cloned licence plates, with the recommendation that customer F should arrange a new licence plate number for their vehicle.

For further information:

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