

# EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q4 2021 (1 OCTOBER 2021 – 31 DECEMBER 2021)



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## 1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

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16 February 2022

**This report covers the Q4 2021 quarterly period (1 October 2021 – 31 December 2022).**

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an unprecedented impact on the Victorian economy. Throughout most of Q4 2021, the number of new cases reported in Melbourne exceeded 1000 per day – substantially higher than during previous quarters.

Government restrictions returned, though they were not as strict as previously, and with a change in emphasis toward “living with the virus”. However, public confidence and traffic volumes were significantly impacted from mid July onwards.

This was reflected in a 36% reduction in the number of cases raised with the EastLink Customer Advocate during Q4 2021 compared to the previous quarter.

In my last report, I explained that in early July 2021, EastLink introduced significant improvements to EastLink toll invoices (which are sent to motorists travelling without valid accounts or trip passes, and are frequently the source of complaint). Toll invoice design and content were redeveloped, to more clearly explain the reason for the toll invoice and the options available to the customer. Toll invoice delivery was also updated, with most toll invoices now issued by email and SMS instead of by post, in accordance with motorists' preferences identified through market research.

One result of these changes is that more than 65% of EastLink toll invoice payments are now made at the EastLink website, compared to 40% previously. Toll invoice payments made via BPAY correspondingly reduced from 45% to 20%.

Paying EastLink toll invoices at the EastLink website instead of via BPAY has significant benefits for customers, including:

- > EastLink toll invoices can be found at the EastLink website using the vehicle's licence plate number as well as using the toll invoice number. When using BPAY, only the BPAY reference code printed on each toll invoice can be used.
- > The EastLink website lists all of the customer's outstanding toll invoices for a vehicle, including any toll invoices which the customer may not have received yet, or which may have been missed by the customer. This is not possible using BPAY, where each toll invoice needs to be paid separately using the unique BPAY reference code printed on each toll invoice. On the EastLink website, the customer can see and take steps to address the whole picture.
- > Using BPAY, toll invoices cannot be paid after their Due Date. By contrast, when using the EastLink website, if a toll invoice has been replaced by an overdue notice, then the overdue notice is automatically displayed and able to be paid, even if the customer has not received it yet.
- > Using BPAY, overdue notices cannot be paid after their Due Date. By contrast, when using the EastLink website, if an overdue notice is passed its Due Date, it continues to be able to be paid into the future, with the charges for any trip that has been passed to Victoria Police for infringement purposes automatically deducted from the amount outstanding.
- > If the customer has an EastLink account, then when using the EastLink website any account issue that contributed to the toll invoice can be identified and addressed at the same time. For example, the account balance and status can be checked to see if the account has been suspended, and then an account payment made to reactivate the account. The list of vehicles on the account can also be checked to ensure it is up to date, and any new vehicle can be added to the account.

**If you have been directly affected by COVID-19 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](http://www.eastlink.com.au/hardship).

For more information about the role of the EastLink Customer Advocate, visit [www.eastlink.com.au/customeradvocate](http://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 Q4 2021 related to toll invoices. This is slightly higher than the nominal range (40%-46%).

Table 1: ECA cases raised

| ECA CASES RAISED                             | Oct 2021 | Nov 2021 | Dec 2021 | Q4 2021   |
|--|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Toll invoice                                 | 2        | 4        | 4        | 10        |
| Toll invoice payment                         | 2        | 0        | 0        | 2         |
| Account charge                               | 0        | 0        | 1        | 1         |
| Account charge for a sold vehicle            | 0        | 0        | 1        | 1         |
| Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc | 0        | 0        | 1        | 1         |
| Customer service                             | 2        | 1        | 1        | 4         |
| Website                                      | 0        | 0        | 1        | 1         |
| Infringements (fines)                        | 1        | 0        | 0        | 1         |
| Abandoned vehicle                            | 0        | 1        | 0        | 1         |
| Unknown (withdrawn, insufficient details)    | 0        | 1        | 0        | 1         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                 | <b>7</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>9</b> | <b>23</b> |

### 2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q4 2021 have been closed.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

| ECA CASES CLOSED                                | Oct 2021 | Nov 2021 | Dec 2021 | Q4 2021   |
|---|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Q4 2021 cases closed (as at date of report)     | 7        | 7        | 9        | 23        |
| Q4 2021 cases still open (as at date of report) | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                    | <b>7</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>9</b> | <b>23</b> |

### 2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 30% 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.

22% of cases were fully upheld, and a further 26% of cases were partially upheld. In 22% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable.

Table 3: ECA case findings

| ECA CASE FINDINGS                      | Oct 2021 | Nov 2021 | Dec 2021 | Q4 2021   |
|--|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Service expedited (no valid complaint) | 5        | 1        | 1        | 7         |
| Complaint upheld                       | 1        | 3        | 1        | 5         |
| Complaint partially upheld             | 1        | 0        | 5        | 6         |
| Complaint rejected                     | 0        | 3        | 2        | 5         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                           | <b>7</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>9</b> | <b>23</b> |

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 if the trip is subject to an 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 &amp; credits

| ECA CASE FINDINGS – REFUNDS & CREDITS | Oct 2021 | Nov 2021 | Dec 2021 | Q4 2021 |
|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|---------|
| Refunds & credits awarded             | \$53     | \$463    | \$265    | \$781   |

## 2.4 ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE CASES

The average elapsed time to close ECA cases during the quarter was 2.8 days. This elapsed time includes weekend days and public holidays.

Table 5: Elapsed time to close ECA cases

| ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES    | Oct 2021 | Nov 2021 | Dec 2021 | Q4 2021 |
|------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|---------|
| Average time to close cases (days) | 1.4      | 3.7      | 3.1      | 2.8     |

### Case Study – wrong licence plate number specified when purchasing EastLink trip passes

The customer's vehicle travelled three times on EastLink.

Between the second and third trips, two EastLink trip passes were purchased – however the customer provided the wrong licence plate number (four letters were jumbled up).

This led to two EastLink toll invoices being issued, which were not paid by their Due Dates.

Consequently, two EastLink overdue notices were issued.

Following the customer's contact to the EastLink Customer Advocate, this licence plate number error was detected.

As two EastLink trip passes had been purchased (albeit for the wrong licence plate number), the overdue notice for two of the three trips was cancelled.

However, the overdue notice for the third trip remained payable, as it would have been issued even if the customer had not made the licence plate number error when purchasing the EastLink trip passes. This is because only two trip passes were purchased, whereas three trips were made.

The investigation also revealed some older debt still outstanding and payable to EastLink by the customer, and the customer was reminded about this older debt.

### 3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

#### 3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

In Q4 2021, a total of 23 cases were raised with me.

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 in Q4 2021 (23 cases) was significantly lower than the nominal case rate, and is by far the lowest quarterly figure recorded. It's likely this reduction was due to the levels of COVID infections being substantially higher than during previous quarters, the return of government restrictions, and the significant reduction in traffic on EastLink during the quarter.

Chart 1: ECA cases trend

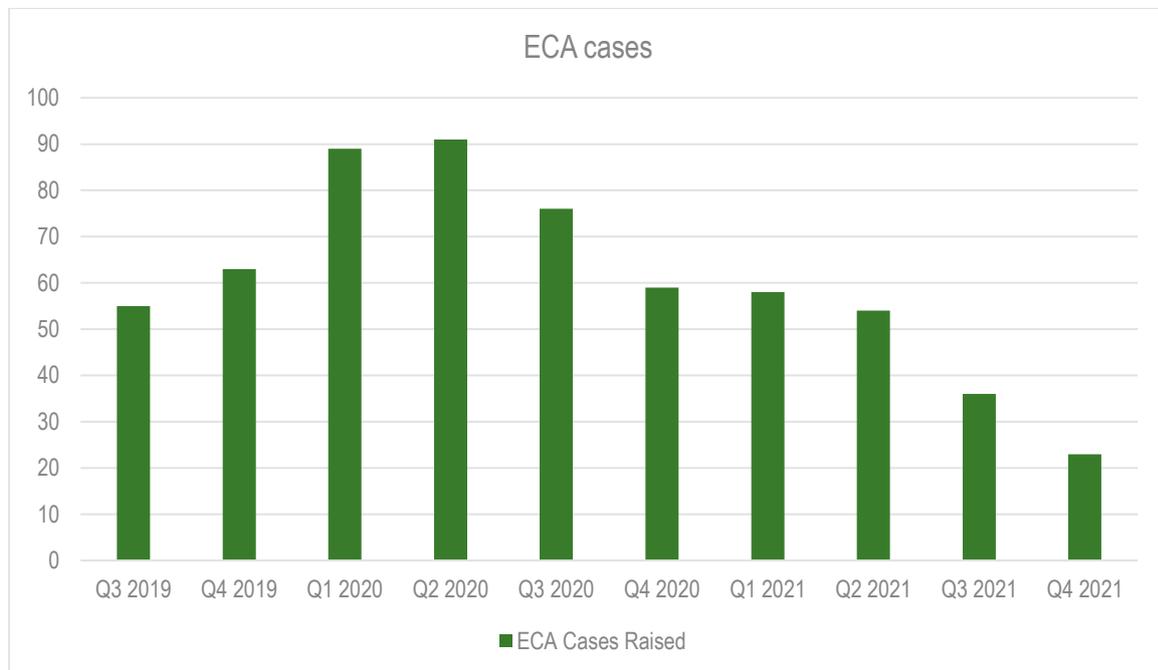


Table 6 shows the breakdown of cases across all case types over the past two years, with no surprises.

Table 6: ECA cases trend

| ECA CASES                         | 2020 |    |    |    | 2021 |    |    |    |
|-----------------------------------|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|
|                                   | Q1   | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1   | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |
| Service request                   | 2    | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0    | 0  | 0  | 0  |
| Toll invoice                      | 44   | 31 | 31 | 18 | 19   | 23 | 16 | 10 |
| Toll invoice SMS/email message    | 1    | 3  | 0  | 1  | 2    | 1  | 3  | 0  |
| Toll invoice payment              | 1    | 3  | 2  | 1  | 2    | 1  | 0  | 2  |
| Account notice                    | 0    | 0  | 1  | 0  | 2    | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| Account payment                   | 4    | 4  | 0  | 4  | 1    | 0  | 2  | 0  |
| Account charge                    | 2    | 10 | 8  | 3  | 3    | 7  | 1  | 1  |
| Account charge for a sold vehicle | 4    | 3  | 1  | 0  | 4    | 0  | 1  | 1  |

| ECA CASES                                    | 2020      |           |           |           | 2021      |           |           |           |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|  |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc | 3         | 5         | 2         | 3         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 1         |
| 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         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 3         | 1         | 1         | 0         |
| Deceased account                             | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Tags   | 2         | 1         | 1         | 2         | 1         | 1         | 2         | 0         |
| Tolls  | 1         | 1         | 1         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Tolling class                                | 0         | 1         | 1         | 0         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Trip pass                                    | 0         | 2         | 0         | 2         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         |
| Rental vehicle toll payment                  | 1         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Debt recovery                                | 0         | 0         | 2         | 1         | 2         | 2         | 0         | 0         |
| Customer service                             | 13        | 13        | 14        | 17        | 7         | 5         | 5         | 4         |
| Payment options                              | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Website                                      | 0         | 1         | 0         | 3         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 1         |
| Hardship assistance                          | 1         | 3         | 4         | 2         | 5         | 8         | 1         | 0         |
| Payment plan                                 | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Infringements (fines)                        | 4         | 3         | 2         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 2         | 1         |
| Incident response                            | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Debris damage                                | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Abandoned vehicle                            | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         |
| Road maintenance                             | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Signage                                      | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Litter                                       | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Noise  | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Speed limit                                  | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Graffiti                                     | 0         | 0         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Landscaping                                  | 2         | 0         | 3         | 1         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| EastLink Trail                               | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Wildlife                                     | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         |
| Privacy                                      | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Problem with another tollway operator        | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         |
| Unknown (withdrawn, insufficient details)    | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         |
| Police enquiry                               | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                 | <b>89</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>76</b> | <b>59</b> | <b>58</b> | <b>54</b> | <b>36</b> | <b>23</b> |

The number of complaints that were fully upheld or partially upheld during Q4 2021 was the same as the previous quarter. The number of complaints that were rejected decreased from 8 to 5 (-37%) – see Table 7.

On examination, 7 of the 23 cases raised during Q4 2021 were in fact found to be requests for customer service with no valid complaint, rather than unresolved customer complaints – see Table 7. For example, during Q4 2021: customers seeking assistance with making a payment; customers seeking to make a change to their EastLink account; and a request for assistance from a community legal centre on behalf of a customer. Such cases are forwarded to the EastLink customer service team (or other department where appropriate) for expedited service.

Table 7: ECA case findings trend

| ECA CASES                              | 2020 |    |    |    | 2021 |    |    |    |
|--|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|
|  | Q1   | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1   | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |
| Service expedited (no valid complaint) | 44   | 43 | 48 | 41 | 29   | 20 | 14 | 7  |
| Complaint upheld                       | 15   | 15 | 6  | 6  | 7    | 13 | 10 | 5  |

| ECA CASES                                 | 2020      |           |           |           | 2021      |           |           |           |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Complaint partially upheld                | 14        | 10        | 8         | 5         | 8         | 9         | 1         | 6         |
| Complaint rejected                        | 14        | 22        | 11        | 7         | 14        | 11        | 8         | 5         |
| Referred to another tollway operator etc. | 2         | 0         | 3         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 2         | 0         |
| Insufficient details provided             | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 0         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                              | <b>89</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>76</b> | <b>59</b> | <b>58</b> | <b>54</b> | <b>36</b> | <b>23</b> |

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q4 2021 was \$781, which is towards the lower end of the nominal range – see Table 8.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

| ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS | 2020    |       |       |         | 2021    |         |       |       |
|-------------------------------|---------|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------|-------|-------|
|                               | Q1      | Q2    | Q3    | Q4      | Q1      | Q2      | Q3    | Q4    |
| Refunds & credits awarded     | \$1,707 | \$974 | \$737 | \$1,131 | \$2,789 | \$2,103 | \$647 | \$781 |

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q4 2021 was at the higher end of the nominal range – see Table 9.

Although at the higher end, the average 2.8 calendar days to close an ECA case is still a good response time – especially as it measures elapsed *calendar* days rather than elapsed *business* days.

Two cases in Q4 2021 took an unusually long time to close: 13 days and 10 days respectively. The delay in both of these cases was due to the vehicle registration authority taking time to respond to requests for details about vehicle registered owners.

Excluding these two cases, the average time to close ECA cases during Q4 2021 would fall to 2.0 calendar days.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

| ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES    | 2020 |     |     |     | 2021 |     |     |     |
|------------------------------------|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
|                                    | Q1   | Q2  | Q3  | Q4  | Q1   | Q2  | Q3  | Q4  |
| Average time to close cases (days) | 2.2  | 1.8 | 1.3 | 2.5 | 2.8  | 2.1 | 1.9 | 2.8 |

## 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 (COURTESY CAR)

Customer A complained about an EastLink toll invoice received for a car service courtesy car, where the travel time was after the courtesy car had been returned to the car service provider. The problem was identified – the car service provider had received the original EastLink toll invoice and incorrectly nominated Customer A, leading to the EastLink toll invoice issued to Customer A. A second EastLink toll invoice – not yet received by Customer A – was also discovered with the same problem. Both EastLink toll invoices issued to Customer A were cancelled, and re-issued back to the car service provider.

### 4.2 CUSTOMER B (ABANDONED VEHICLE)

Customer B was seeking assistance with payment of vehicle towing and impoundment costs charged by a towing operator, following removal of customer B's broken down vehicle from EastLink. Investigation revealed that the vehicle was abandoned without registration plates and without an unregistered vehicle permit. A handwritten note left on the windscreen by Customer B did not include any contact details. The vehicle was towed 29 hours after it was abandoned – which was considered to be

sufficient time for a motorist to arrange their own removal of a broken down vehicle given that commercial roadside assistance services are readily available upon request 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The vehicle was a safety hazard, as there were no safety barriers between the vehicle and roadway. EastLink notified Victoria Police about the removal of the vehicle from EastLink. Customer B did not return to the EastLink site to attempt to collect the vehicle until three weeks after the vehicle was abandoned. It was determined that EastLink had acted fairly and reasonably, and that the towing and impoundment costs charged by the towing operator should be paid by Customer B.

#### **4.3 CUSTOMER C (VEHICLE TRANSFERRED TO A RELATIVE)**

Customer C received three EastLink toll invoices for a vehicle that had been transferred to a relative of Customer C. The state registration authority had already provided Customer C's details for the vehicle at the dates/times of travel, leading to the three EastLink toll invoices being sent to Customer C. However, following Customer C's complaint to the EastLink Customer Advocate, the state registration authority was again contacted, and this time confirmed that the vehicle was transferred to Customer C's relative shortly after most of the trips in the three EastLink toll invoices. All three EastLink toll invoices issued to Customer C were cancelled and re-issued to Customer C's relative.

#### **4.4 CUSTOMER D (WRONG PASS PURCHASED)**

A vehicle travelled on EastLink twice on one day without an arrangement to pay the toll. The registration authority advised EastLink that Customer D was the person responsible for the vehicle. EastLink issued to Customer D a toll invoice and subsequent overdue notice for the vehicle's travel. There was no error by EastLink. Customer D complained that they had already paid Transurban Linkt, providing a Transurban Linkt payment receipt. Investigation revealed that the payment receipt was for a Transurban Linkt 24 hour / weekend pass that is not valid for travel on EastLink (only valid for travel on Transurban's CityLink). The toll invoice / overdue notice were cancelled as Customer D had made a genuine once-off error, had not tried to avoid payment, and had made contact with EastLink quickly to resolve the issue. However, the investigation also revealed some older debt still outstanding and payable to EastLink by Customer D. Customer D was reminded about this older debt.

#### **4.5 CUSTOMER E (GOODWILL CREDIT OFFERED)**

Customer E complained about toll invoice fees being charged in addition to tolls. Investigation revealed that Customer E's EastLink account was suspended on three occasions. Despite suspension warnings and account suspension notices being sent to Customer E, payments were not made by Customer E until more than one month after each suspension warning was sent (and around two weeks after account suspension notices). Customer E's vehicles continued to travel while the account was suspended, leading to toll invoice fees being charged. EastLink's customer service team had already offered the customer a goodwill credit amounting to 57% of the fees charged, which was rejected by Customer E. It was determined that this offer by EastLink's customer service team is fair and reasonable under the circumstances.

**For further information:**

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