

EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q4 2023 (1 OCTOBER 2023 – 31 DECEMBER 2023)



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1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

22 January 2024

This report covers the Q4 2023 quarterly period (1 October 2023 – 31 December 2023).

The number of cases raised in Q4 2023 (54 cases) was at the mid-point of the nominal range (50 to 60 cases per quarter).

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q4 2023 (2.5 calendar days) was slightly less than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.7 calendar days).

Nearly three-quarters of the cases raised during Q4 2023 related to the following:

- > toll invoices (57%) – which is a higher proportion than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (41%). However, there is no indication of a specific or systemic toll invoice failure contributing to this increase.
- > account charges (15%) – which is slightly higher than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (12%).

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q4 2023 (\$1,619) was more than double the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$714). However, the Q4 2023 figure is still less than the top three highest quarters on record for refunds and credits: \$2,789 and \$2,103 for two quarters in 2021; and \$1,707 for one quarter in 2020.

Protection of customer data continues to be of critical importance.

During Q4 2023, EastLink launched two-factor authentication for account login at the EastLink website, which has further strengthened customer data security. Two-factor authentication is mandatory and now applies to all EastLink accounts.

Customers 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.

Also during Q4 2023, EastLink launched one-time passcodes for all EastLink trip pass purchases at the EastLink website, which has further strengthened the security of customer financial transactions.

Customers need to provide a mobile phone number when purchasing an EastLink trip pass. A one-time passcode is then sent to that mobile phone number, and the transaction is only allowed to proceed to the payment stage and completion if the correct passcode is entered into the website.

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

Nearly three-quarters of the cases raised during Q4 2023 related to the following:

- > toll invoices (57%)
- > account charges (15%)

Table 1: ECA cases raised

ECA CASES RAISED	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Dec 2023	Q4 2023
Toll invoice	12	11	8	31
Account payment	0	1	0	1
Account charge	5	0	0	5
Account charge for a sold vehicle	0	1	0	1
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	0	1	1	2
Tags	0	1	1	2
Tolls	0	0	1	1
Customer service	4	0	0	4
Website	0	1	2	3
Hardship assistance	0	0	1	1
Infringements (fines)	0	1	0	1
Abandoned vehicle	0	1	0	1
Road maintenance	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	21	18	15	54

2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q4 2023 have been closed.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

ECA CASES CLOSED	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Dec 2023	Q4 2023
Q4 2023 cases closed (as at date of report)	21	18	15	54
Q4 2023 cases still open (as at date of report)	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	21	18	15	54

2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 33% 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 26% of cases were partially upheld.

In 20% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable.

In one case the customer was referred to another tollway operator or other body.

In one other case the customer did not provide sufficient details to allow the case to be investigated (despite specific information requested and reminders sent).

Table 3: ECA case findings

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Dec 2023	Q4 2023
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	7	6	5	18
Complaint upheld	4	3	2	9
Complaint partially upheld	5	3	6	14
Complaint rejected	4	6	1	11
Complaint referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	0	1	1
Insufficient details provided	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	21	18	15	54

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	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Dec 2023	Q4 2023
Refunds & credits awarded	\$928	\$583	\$108	\$1,619

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	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Dec 2023	Q4 2023
Average time to close cases (calendar days)	2.6	3.1	1.7	2.5

Case Study – unattended vehicle towed from EastLink

The customer complained after their unattended vehicle was towed from EastLink and towing charges were incurred.

Investigation revealed that the vehicle had apparently either broken down or run out of fuel and was left, unattended, in the left-hand emergency lane.

EastLink’s incident response team attended the site and assessed the vehicle to be a safety hazard.

As there were no roadside safety barriers between the roadway and the vehicle, there is no reason for disputing this assessment.

In a courtesy phone call with the customer, EastLink’s control room team warned that EastLink would arrange towing if the vehicle was not removed by the customer. The customer undertook to remove the vehicle later that same day.

On the day following the courtesy phone call, the vehicle was towed from EastLink.

The towing was more than 67 hours after it was first checked by the EastLink incident response team.

This is a generous timeframe for EastLink to have allowed for the customer to arrange for removal of their vehicle from EastLink, and there was no error by EastLink.

3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

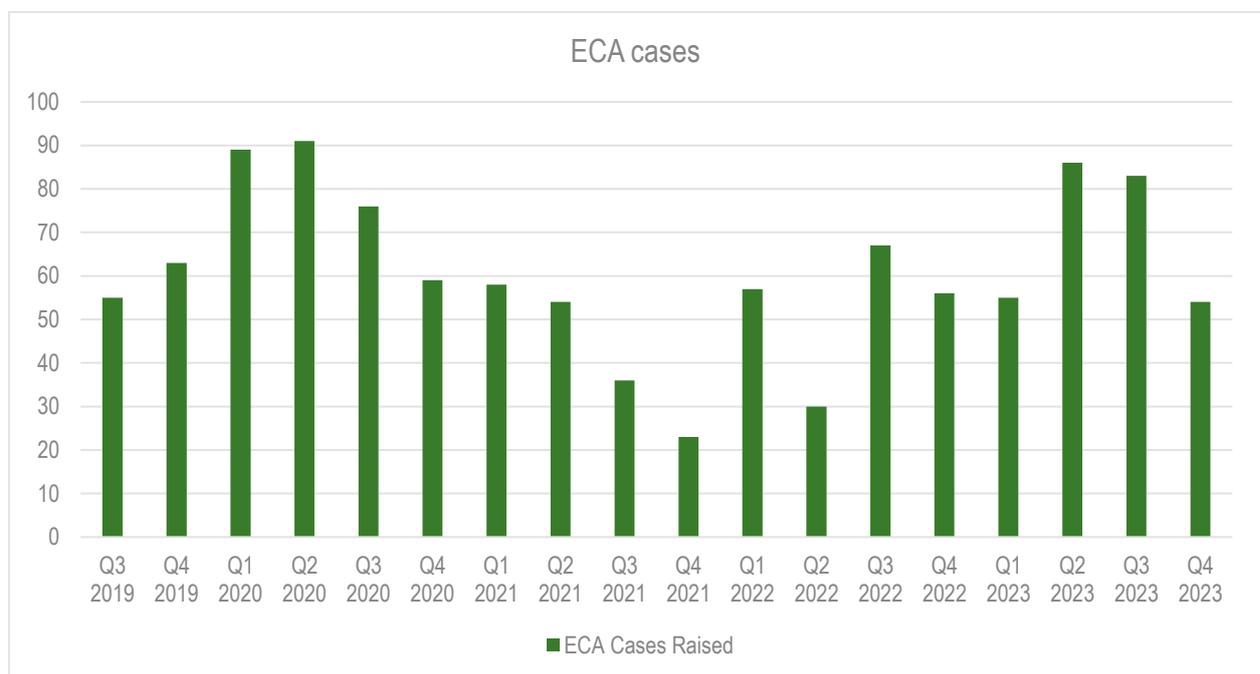
3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

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. A more recent wave in the middle quarters of 2023 is 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 Q4 2023 (54 cases) has returned once again to the midpoint of the nominal range.

Chart 1: ECA cases trend



57% of the cases raised during Q4 2023 related to toll invoices, which is a higher proportion than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (41%) – see Table 6.

However, there is no indication of a specific or systemic toll invoice failure contributing to this increase, and a wide range of outcomes was recorded for toll invoice cases. Of the 31 cases raised in relation to toll invoices during Q4 2023:

- > 8 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “complaint upheld”
- > 8 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “complaint partially upheld”
- > 7 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “service expedited (no valid complaint)”
- > 7 of these toll invoice cases were of finding type “complaint rejected”
- > 1 of these toll invoice cases was of finding type “referred”

A further 15% of the cases raised during Q4 2023 related to account charges, which is slightly higher than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (12%).

Table 6: ECA cases trend

ECA CASES	2022				2023			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Toll invoice	20	15	31	18	15	35	35	31
Toll invoice communications	2	0	0	0	1	2	1	0
Toll invoice payment	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Account notice	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Account payment	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	1
Account charge	4	4	6	5	2	6	9	5
Account charge for a sold vehicle	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	2	0	1	0	1	3	5	2
Account charge for an LPN error	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account suspension	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account closure	1	0	0	1	5	4	1	0
Deceased account	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tags	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	2
Tolls	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	1
Tolling class	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Trip pass	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Debt recovery	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Customer service	17	4	10	9	6	11	24	4
Payment options	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Website	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3
Hardship assistance	2	4	4	4	9	7	2	1
Payment plan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Third party scam	0	0	6	7	5	0	1	0
Infringements (fines)	0	1	2	6	3	4	0	1
Incident response	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debris damage	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Abandoned vehicle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Road maintenance	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Signage	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Litter	0	0	0	0	0	1	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	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
EastLink Trail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wildlife	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Privacy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown (withdrawn, insufficient details)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Police enquiry	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
CCTV request	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Insurance claim	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	57	30	67	56	55	86	83	54

As outlined earlier in section 3.1, the number of cases in Q4 2023 (54 cases) was close to the midpoint of the nominal range (50-60 cases).

The distribution of these cases across each category of case findings was not particularly unusual in Q4 2023 compared to previous quarters – see Table 7.

Table 7: ECA case findings trend

ECA CASE FINDINGS	2022				2023			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	24	12	32	28	26	45	49	18
Complaint upheld	17	9	14	9	9	16	14	9
Complaint partially upheld	5	3	13	8	7	9	5	14
Complaint rejected	11	4	8	7	12	10	12	11
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	2	0	2	1	6	3	1
Insufficient details provided	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1
TOTAL	57	30	67	56	55	86	83	54

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q4 2023 (\$1,619) was more than double the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (\$714) – see Table 8.

However, the Q4 2023 figure is still less than the top three highest quarters on record for refunds and credits: \$2,789 and \$2,103 for two quarters in 2021; and \$1,707 for one quarter in 2020.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS	2022				2023			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Refunds & credits awarded	\$690	\$511	\$1,088	\$264	\$1,133	\$736	\$573	\$1,619

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q4 2023 (2.5 calendar days) was slightly less than the longer term average over the preceding seven quarters (2.7 calendar days) – see Table 9.

Two cases in Q4 2023 took a relatively long time to close (13 calendar days and 11 calendar days respectively):

- > In one of these two cases, the delay was attributed to waiting for an EastLink technical specialist to provide information to assist with investigation of the case.
- > In the other case, the delay was attributed to waiting for third party tollway operator to provide information to assist with investigation of the case.

Excluding these two cases, the average time to close ECA cases during Q4 2023 would fall to just 2.1 calendar days.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

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

Customer A complained about double-charging for EastLink travel. Investigation revealed that the vehicle was carrying two tags at the same time: one EastLink tag and one tag provided by another tollway operator. Customer A's vehicle was also listed on the EastLink account as well as the account provided by the other tollway operator. A total of 39 EastLink trips were part charged to the EastLink account and part charged to the account with the other tollway operator. However, no individual toll gantry passages were charged to both accounts, and the toll cap price was not exceeded for any trip. Therefore there was no double-charging and no refund was due to the customer (to either account). The EastLink account was closed with Customer A's approval, to ensure that only one tag is active in the vehicle and the vehicle is only linked to the same account as the active tag.

4.2 CUSTOMER B (VEHICLE ADDED TO ACCOUNT INCORRECTLY)

Customer B complained about receiving an EastLink toll invoice even though the vehicle had been added to an account provided by another tollway operator. Investigation revealed that the vehicle had originally been added to the account with the correct licence plate number but the state of registration was specified incorrectly. When the vehicle travelled on EastLink, this meant that there was no valid account for the vehicle and an EastLink toll invoice was issued. There was no error by EastLink. The vehicle details were subsequently corrected by Customer B on the account with the other tollway operator. The error was made in good faith and the customer clearly had the intention to pay, so the toll invoice fee (\$6.58) was waived.

4.3 CUSTOMER C (CLONED VEHICLE)

Customer C complained about three EastLink toll invoices and disputed the travel. Investigation revealed that Customer C's vehicle had been cloned. The three EastLink toll invoices were cancelled. Steps were also taken aimed at ensuring Customer C does not receive EastLink toll invoices for future travel by the offending vehicle on EastLink. It was also detected that there was a fourth toll invoice (recently issued by another tollway operator) outstanding for the same vehicle. Customer C was advised to contact that tollway operator about the fourth toll invoice.

4.4 CUSTOMER D (RENTAL VEHICLE NOT REMOVED FROM ACCOUNT)

Customer D complained about charges on their EastLink account for a rental vehicle that had been returned. Investigation revealed that 2 EastLink trips and 22 trips on another tollway were charged to Customer D's account after the rental vehicle was returned. EastLink had already paid the other tollway operator for the 22 trips on their tollway and a refund to EastLink is not possible. EastLink customer service had already provided a goodwill credit amounting to 50% of the charges for these 24 trips. There was no error by EastLink, and the goodwill credit amount already provided is fair and reasonable under the circumstances. Customer D was advised that the account remains suspended and sufficient payment needs to be made to reactivate the account. It was also detected that there were two toll invoices recently issued by another tollway operator for Customer D's vehicle due to Customer D's account being suspended. Customer D was advised to contact that tollway operator about those two toll invoices.

4.5 CUSTOMER E (RENTAL VEHICLE NOT REMOVED FROM ACCOUNT BY CUSTOMER IN NSW)

Customer E complained about charges on their EastLink account for a rental vehicle that had been returned. Investigation revealed that 1 EastLink trip and 2 trips on another tollway were charged to Customer E's account after the rental vehicle was returned. EastLink customer service had already provided a goodwill credit equal to the total charges for these 3 trips. There was no error by EastLink, and the goodwill credit amount already provided is fair and reasonable under the circumstances. It was noticed that Customer E has a NSW address and therefore may be eligible for the NSW Government's new 'toll relief scheme' for travel on NSW tollways. Information about this scheme was provided to Customer E, including eligibility rules and noting the NSW government's requirement that a tolling account with a NSW tollway operator would be required to take advantage of the scheme.

For further information:

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