

EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE REPORT

Q2 2021 (1 APRIL 2021 – 30 JUNE 2021)



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1. EASTLINK CUSTOMER ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE

6 July 2021

This report covers the Q2 2021 quarterly period (1 April 2021 – 30 June 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an unprecedented impact on the Victorian economy.

During Q2 2021, Melbourne continued its recovery from the impact of its second wave of COVID-19 infections and an extended lockdown which had taken up most of July-October 2020.

This recovery was interrupted and partially set back by a 'circuit-breaker' lockdown, which was introduced at midnight on 27 May 2021 in response to locally acquired cases of COVID-19 infection.

The circuit-breaker lockdown would continue for a fortnight, with some of its restrictions still remaining in place as I write this (e.g. workplaces are limited to 75% capacity or 30 people whichever is greater, and facemasks are mandatory at all indoor locations except homes).

During this circuit-breaker lockdown, traffic volumes on EastLink decreased significantly.

Following the circuit-breaker lockdown, EastLink traffic volumes steadily recovered as restrictions were eased, and they are now almost back to pre-pandemic levels (again).

On page 6 of this report I have included a chart showing the number of EastLink Customer Advocate (ECA) cases raised each quarter. This clearly shows a wave of additional cases during the first half of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first emerged and impacted the economy, and uncertainty was probably at its highest. It is also now apparent that the nominal case rate is in the 50 to 60 cases per quarter range. During Q2 2021, the number of cases was 54.

I previously reported that EastLink donated \$400,000 to community service providers to assist local people experiencing disadvantage during these difficult times. Those donations were to Peninsula Community Legal Centre, Eastern Community Legal Centre, EACH and Beyond Blue.

Today, I can report that EastLink has made two further donations, bringing the total donations in 2021 to \$600,000:

- > \$100,000 to Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre
- > \$100,000 to Reading Out Of Poverty.

Each of these donations demonstrates that EastLink recognises that some local people living in the EastLink corridor have been directly affected and are experiencing financial hardship, mental health issues and family violence.

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.

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

46% of the cases raised during Q2 2021 related to toll invoices. This is within the nominal range.

Table 1: ECA cases raised

ECA CASES RAISED	Apr 2021	May 2021	Jun 2021	Q2 2021
Toll invoice	6	6	11	23
Toll invoice SMS message	0	0	1	1
Toll invoice payment	1	0	0	1
Account notice	0	1	0	1
Account charge	2	2	3	7
Account closure	0	1	0	1
Tags	0	1	0	1
Trip pass	0	0	1	1
Debt recovery	1	1	0	2
Customer service	4	1	0	5
Website	1	0	0	1
Hardship assistance	5	2	1	8
Infringements (fines)	0	0	1	1
Wildlife	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	21	15	18	54

2.2 CASES CLOSED

All of the cases raised during Q2 2021 have been closed.

Table 2: ECA cases closed

ECA CASES CLOSED	Apr 2021	May 2021	Jun 2021	Q2 2021
Q2 2021 cases closed (as at date of report)	21	15	18	54
Q2 2021 cases still open (as at date of report)	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	21	15	18	54

2.3 CASE FINDINGS

In 37% 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.

24% of cases were fully upheld, and a further 17% of cases were partially upheld. In 20% of cases the complaint was rejected with no practical customer service assistance identifiable. In a single case, the customer was not able to provide sufficient details to allow the complaint to be investigated. No cases were referred to a third party.

Table 3: ECA case findings

ECA CASE FINDINGS	Apr 2021	May 2021	Jun 2021	Q2 2021
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	9	4	7	20
Complaint upheld	4	3	6	13
Complaint partially upheld	3	3	3	9
Complaint rejected	5	5	1	11
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	0	0	0	0
Insufficient details provided	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	21	15	18	54

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 disputed, 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	Apr 2021	May 2021	Jun 2021	Q2 2021
Refunds & credits awarded	\$1,762	\$85	\$256	\$2,103

2.4 ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE CASES

The average elapsed time to close ECA cases during the quarter was 2.1 days. This elapsed time includes weekend days and public holidays.

Table 5: Elapsed time to close ECA cases

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	Apr 2021	May 2021	Jun 2021	Q2 2021
Average time to close cases (days)	2.6	1.4	2.1	2.1

Case Study – cloned number plates

On 3/7/2021, the Herald Sun published a report about the growing problem of cloned number plates. These are some extracts:

Cloned number plates see criminals get away with murder

Cloned number plates are helping ‘brazen chancers’ and criminals disguise a car’s identity to get away with everything from paying toll fees and speeding fines, to murder.

Crooks have traditionally stolen either number plates or cars to use for a few hours (or even minutes) to pull a crime. But they always ran the risk of the theft being reported and the “hot” plates being on a police watch list – not ideal if you are on the way to robbing a bank.

Cloned plates are different: They can be made to match the genuine plates of a vehicle of identical make, model and colour, meaning a routine check won’t reveal anything out of place.

But cloned plates are not just a headache for police fighting serious crime. More and more, they affect law-abiding citizens. These are the people shocked when police come knocking with accusations of stealing fuel from service stations – or when they get a court summons over a string of unpaid fines because someone in a disguised vehicle has been rocketing past speed cameras and tollway transponders.

A customer complained about receiving EastLink toll invoices for a vehicle that had been scrapped some time ago. The customer provided a copy of the VicRoads certificate of vehicle registration cancellation.

EastLink was able to verify through toll point images that another vehicle had been fraudulently travelling using cloned licence plates of the scrapped vehicle.

EastLink cancelled the toll invoices issued to the customer (amounting to \$128.70), and took steps to reduce the likelihood of further toll invoices being issued by EastLink to the customer for travel by the cloned vehicle.

The customer was also advised to contact Victoria Police to report the fraudulently cloned plates, and to contact Transurban Linkt in the event of toll invoices being received for travel on Transurban’s CityLink tollway.

3. CUSTOMER ADVOCATE CASE TRENDS

3.1 HISTORICAL TRENDS

In Q2 2021, a total of 54 cases were raised with me.

Chart 1 shows a wave of additional cases during the first half of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first emerged and impacted the economy. It is now apparent that the nominal case rate is in the 50 to 60 cases per quarter range.

Table 6 shows the breakdown of cases across all case types.

Chart 1: ECA cases trend

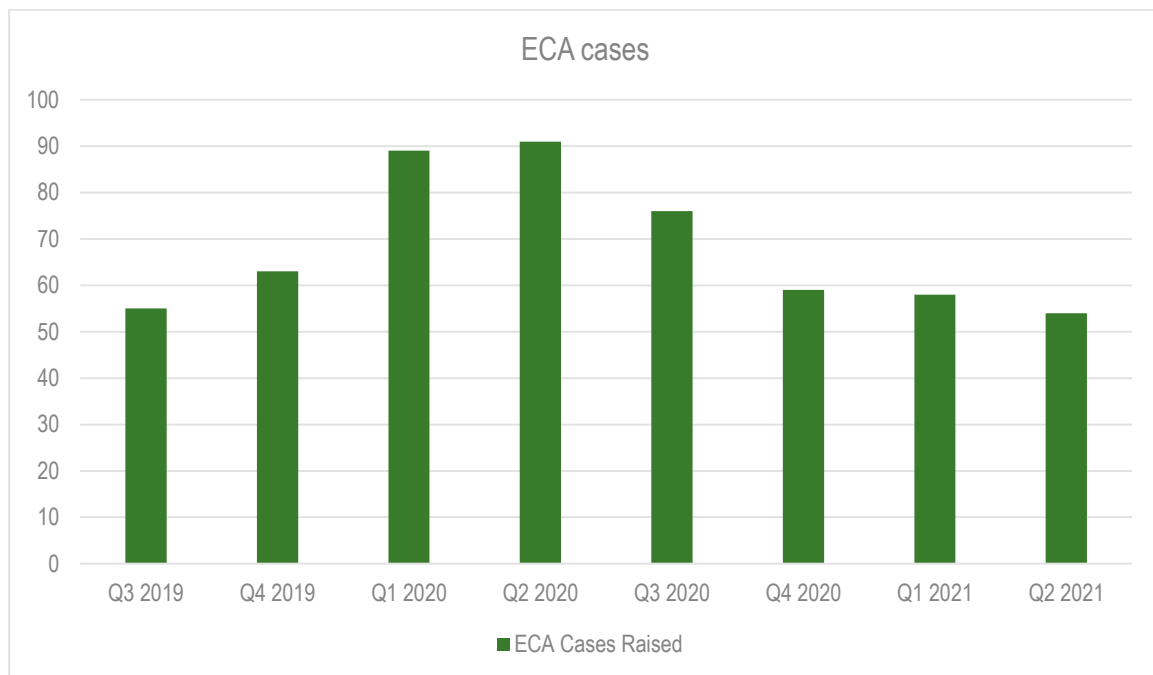


Table 6: ECA cases trend

ECA CASES	2019		2020				2021	
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Service request	5	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Toll invoice	24	27	44	31	31	18	19	23
Toll invoice SMS messages	0	0	1	3	0	1	2	1
Toll invoice payment	0	0	1	3	2	1	2	1
Account notice	1	2	0	0	1	0	2	1
Account payment	2	0	4	4	0	4	1	0
Account charge	1	2	2	10	8	3	3	7
Account charge for a sold vehicle	1	2	4	3	1	0	4	0
Account charge for stolen plates/vehicle etc	0	3	3	5	2	3	1	0
Account charge for an LPN error	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account suspension	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Account closure	1	0	1	0	1	0	3	1
Deceased account	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Tags	2	0	2	1	1	2	1	1

ECA CASES	2019		2020				2021	
Tolls	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
Tolling class	0	1	0	1	1	0	2	0
Trip pass	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	1
Rental vehicle toll payment	4	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
Debt recovery	1	1	0	0	2	1	2	2
Customer service	2	7	13	13	14	17	7	5
Payment options	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Website	0	3	0	1	0	3	0	1
Hardship assistance	0	2	1	3	4	2	5	8
Payment plan	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Infringements (fines)	2	3	4	3	2	0	1	1
Incident response	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Debris damage	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Road maintenance	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Signage	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Litter	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Noise	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Speed limit	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Graffiti	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Landscaping	0	2	2	0	3	1	2	0
EastLink Trail	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wildlife	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Privacy	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Problem with another tollway operator	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown (withdrawn, insufficient details)	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Police search	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	55	63	89	91	76	59	58	54

The number of complaints that were fully upheld or partially upheld increased from 15 to 22 (+47%). The number of complaints that were rejected decreased from 14 to 11 (-21%) – see Table 7.

On examination, 20 of the 54 cases raised during Q2 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 Q2 2021: customers seeking to nominate toll invoices; a customer seeking BPAY details for a payment; a customer seeking confirmation that a payment had been made; a customer wanting to report a lost tag and order a new tag; notification of a deceased customer; and various requests for assistance from financial counsellors. 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	2019		2020				2021	
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Service expedited (no valid complaint)	21	25	44	43	48	41	29	20
Complaint upheld	13	9	15	15	6	6	7	13
Complaint partially upheld	12	18	14	10	8	5	8	9
Complaint rejected	8	11	14	22	11	7	14	11
Referred to another tollway operator etc.	1	0	2	0	3	0	0	0
Insufficient details provided	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
TOTAL	55	63	89	91	76	59	58	54

The total amount of refunds and credits during Q2 2021 was \$2,103, which is a reduction of 25% compared to the previous quarter – see Table 8.

Table 8: ECA case findings – refunds & credits trend

ECA CASES – REFUNDS & CREDITS	2019		2020				2021	
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Refunds & credits awarded	\$738	\$590	\$1,707	\$974	\$737	\$1,131	\$2,789	\$2,103

The elapsed time to close ECA cases during Q2 2021 was lower than the two previous quarters – see Table 9.

However, one case in Q1 2021 took an unusually long 18 days to close. Excluding just that one case, the average time to close ECA cases during Q2 2021 would fall to 1.8 days.

Table 9: Elapsed time to close ECA cases trend

ELAPSED TIME TO CLOSE ECA CASES	2019		2020				2021	
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Average time to close cases (days)	4.0	2.8	2.2	1.8	1.3	2.5	2.8	2.1

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 (LICENCE PLATE NUMBER INCORRECTLY READ)

Customer A complained about having received an EastLink toll invoice for a vehicle they have no knowledge of. Investigation revealed that a mistake was made when reading toll point images of a vehicle's licence plate number – a zero digit '0' was erroneously interpreted as a character 'O'. This led to the wrong vehicle being identified, with the relevant registration authority advising EastLink that Customer A was the last known owner of that wrong vehicle, which Customer A had sold some time ago. The EastLink toll invoice (amounting to \$9.57) was cancelled.

4.2 CUSTOMER B (LICENCE PLATE RE-USED FOR ANOTHER VEHICLE)

Customer B complained about having received an EastLink toll invoice for a vehicle with a licence plate not known to them. Investigation revealed that the relevant registration authority had informed EastLink that Customer B is the last known owner of the vehicle. However Customer B had purchased the vehicle from a third party after the third party had contacted the relevant registration authority to change its number plates to the plates now used by Customer B. The EastLink travel was therefore by another vehicle now fitted with the earlier number plates and not properly registered for some reason. The EastLink travel was not by Customer B's vehicle. The EastLink toll invoice (amounting to \$14.88) was cancelled.

4.3 CUSTOMER C (ACCIDENTAL PURCHASE OF TRIP PASSES)

Customer C complained about not being able to have four unused trip passes refunded. Investigation revealed that Customer C's vehicle had travelled once on EastLink. Customer C wanted to check the balance of their tolling account (issued by another tollway operator) but was unable to do so. Customer C feared their account was suspended, so purchased four EastLink trip passes in two separate online transactions (even though only one EastLink trip had been made). The tolling account was in fact valid, so the toll was correctly charged to the account by EastLink. While trip passes are non-refundable, Customer C had made a genuine mistake. Furthermore, as Customer C's vehicle is active on a valid tolling account, the trip passes would not be able to be consumed prior to their expiry date. The price of the four trip passes (amounting to \$25.92) was refunded to Customer C's credit card.

4.4 CUSTOMER D (MISSING FEE CHARGED FOR A TAG THAT MAY NOT HAVE BEEN RECEIVED)

Customer D complained about being charged a tag missing fee for a tag that Customer D claimed was never received. Investigation revealed that there is evidence that the tag was issued by EastLink and sent to Customer D. However, there is no evidence that the tag was received by Customer D and the tag had never been detected on a toll way. The tag missing fee (amounting to \$40) was credited to Customer D's account.

4.5 CUSTOMER E (INCORRECT VEHICLE OWNER DETAILS)

Customer E complained about receiving a toll invoice for a vehicle that is not in Customer E's possession. Investigation with the relevant registration authority revealed that Customer E is not the owner of the vehicle, correcting an error in their previous advice to EastLink. The toll invoice (amounting to \$26.22) was cancelled and reissued to the new owner of the vehicle.

For further information:

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