

TCO Review

1 January to 31 March 2021

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Tolling Customer Ombudsman

INTRODUCTION

Since the last report, there has been a continuing impact of COVID-19 on the TCO Scheme.

During the period of this report the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst still being felt in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, has been significantly reduced and correspondingly has had a bearing on the number of complaints in each of these States. The impact overall for the quarter is less significant than for the last quarter.

The impact of COVID-19 was still being felt in Queensland and Victoria during this period. In Victoria and Queensland during that period, the community was still experiencing some “lock down” measures. It is true to say, however, that in this period Victorians were subject to COVID-19 measures which were greatly reduced from the measures for the previous 12 months. Even in Sydney, the Northern Beaches was locked down in early January 2021.

Obviously, the impact of COVID-19 may continue beyond March 2021 in all jurisdictions. The more difficult issue to determine is how long the impact of COVID-19 will be felt in each State and to what extent.

Anecdotally, COVID-19 has continued to have an impact on the complaints made by consumers. That is, the nature of the calls made to the TCO through our telephone service were different from prior to COVID-19. Whilst the number of complaints overall have been somewhat reduced because of the reduced traffic on the toll roads, the level of anxiety of the callers had increased. The length of time on calls increased and there were deeper discussions on those calls.

In general, the callers obviously were anxious because of COVID-19, but also were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their health generally and in particular their personal financial circumstances. Another feature of these calls was there were more relatives calling on behalf of the claimant, being generally sons and daughters ringing up in respect to their claimant mothers or fathers. This heightened level of anxiety, once again in my view, added to the overall reluctance of consumers to settle claims. It seemed to mean

that generally consumers adopted a harder line in respect to settlement of a complaint. This led commonly to more correspondence between the parties and more active engagement by the TCO in these matters.

However, in my objective view, the response of the Toll Operators in regard to COVID-19 and the heightened anxiety of consumers has been very professional and with an understanding this is a trying time for consumers. This is particularly the case in respect to those consumers who have lost their jobs or have limited means. To help customers directly impacted during COVID-19, Transurban implemented a number of different initiatives including toll credits, more time to pay, fee waivers, payment plans and the pausing of account suspensions.

I note additionally that the Toll Operators also instituted special toll measures for those essential health workers during the height of the pandemic.

During the July to September 2020 quarter reporting period, I noted there was an increase in the number of complaints out of New South Wales. The reasons for the increase were due to:

- On 21 August 2020, E-way became part of the Transurban Group and E-way customers transitioned across to Transurban's retail brand. Any unresolved E-way customer complaints were re-logged to Linkt New South Wales.
- Post transition there was some delay in the Cashback system operated by TfNSW, resulting in multiple complaints.
- New toll applied to the M5 East (aka M5 tunnel) from 4/5 July 2020, which was previously not tolled, which prompted numerous complaints.
- M8 is a newly completed roadway.

My initial view at the time and which has been confirmed over the last two quarters, is that after an initial flurry and concern by consumers in respect to these matters in the July to September 2020 quarter, these factors do not seem to have an ongoing impact on the complaint numbers. Of course, M5 East and M8 will result in more customers on more tolled roads, so naturally there may be a few more complaints arising because of this fact. The New South Wales complaints in this quarter bears this out (see more detailed analysis of New South Wales below). However, I will continue to monitor closely these factors for the next few periods and the impact they have on complaint numbers going forward.

Looking back on the period of January to March 2021, the impact of COVID-19 has been less significant in terms of complaints in all jurisdictions, but also in respect to its wider impacts on consumers.

COMPLAINT RESOLUTION

The TCO has moved to a quarterly reporting regime. To address the stakeholder feedback that trend analysis would be useful, this report provides data on the last 12 months (building on data already presented) being report 7. The TCO will keep presenting the prior 12 months of statistics on a rolling basis.

Additional information will also be presented as our systems developments allow.

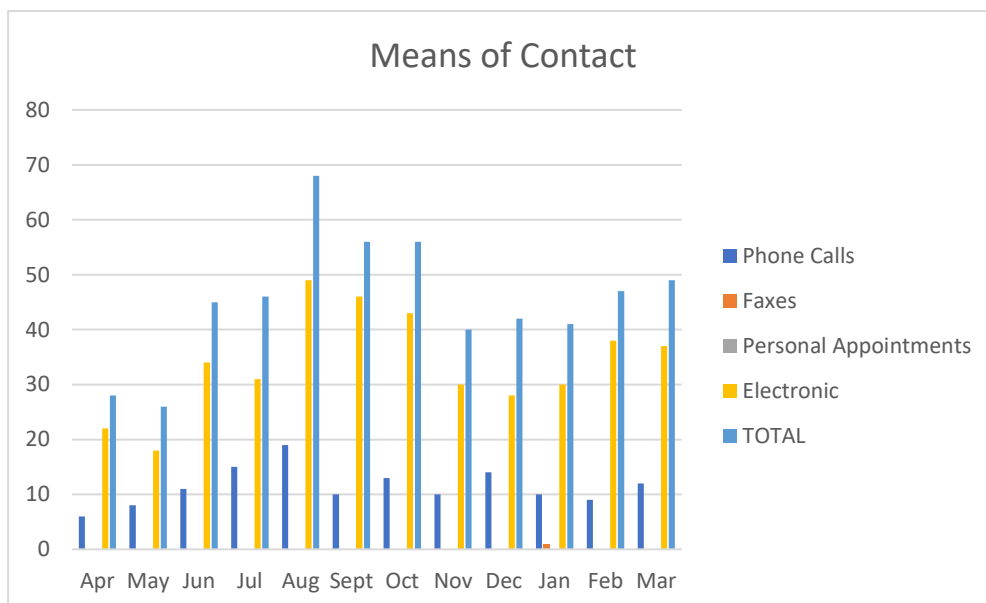
Consumer demographics: Overall, the predominant means of contacting the TCO with a complaint continues to be electronically, either through the online dispute form or via emailing the complaint form after downloading it from the TCO website:

www.tollingombudsman.com.au.

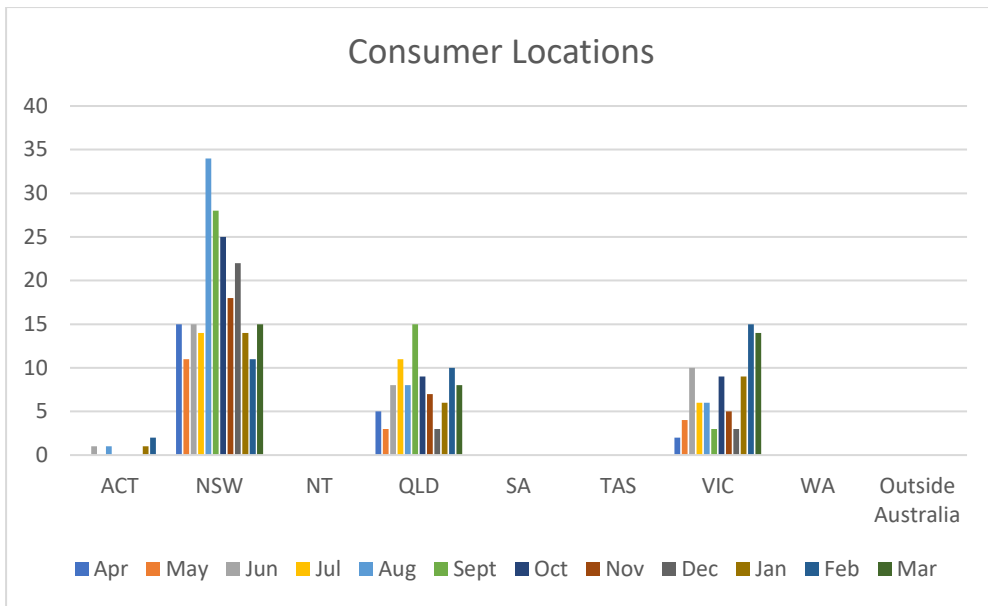
However, the TCO recognises that telephone contact is very important for some consumers and understands some consumers, when a dispute arises, would prefer and need to discuss or clarify issues over the telephone with the Ombudsman. As mentioned above, as COVID-19 has added to the anxiety of consumers, it has been even more important at this time to discuss matters over the telephone with consumers and be aware that consumers may seek more wide-ranging discussions than simply discussing the dispute in hand. Anecdotally, calls to the 1800 number remain steady. However, the number of referrals required from the full-time office hours reception service (another response to recent constructive feedback) to the Ombudsman has generally declined as customers are often able to receive a quick answer to their query from the service staff.

The Ombudsman also made himself available to meet with consumers in Victoria, New South Wales and, in particular, Queensland where the Ombudsman, subject to COVID-19 restrictions, is on the ground in Brisbane for two days per month.

As a general observation, those consumers who solely rely on Australia Post for their communication seem to be more concerned about the amount of time taken to receive communication/correspondence in the mail. This is a matter that has been raised with the TCO during telephone contact. We will continue to monitor this matter going forward. These consumers tend to anecdotally be elderly who either cannot use or do not have access to technology. There is also a small number of consumers who cannot afford the technology.

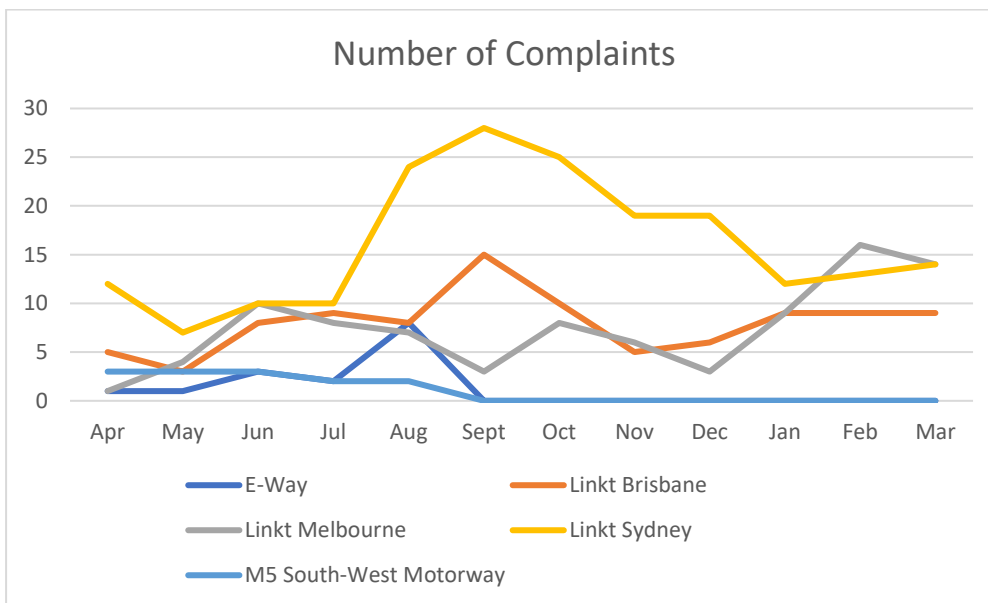


The TCO operates across three states in Australia – New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. It is intuitive that Interlink Roads, which operated the E-way system and the M5 South-West Motorway in New South Wales, would have predominantly New South Wales based consumers, however, the geographic location of Transurban consumers who bring complaints to the TCO is more diverse.



Complaint information

Over the past 12 months (ie March 2020 to March 2021 inclusive), 406 complaints were received for that period. New South Wales consumers continue to represent approximately just over half of the TCO workload, with Victoria approximately 20% and Queensland consumers just over 30%. Not surprisingly, over the last 12 months Victoria has been most impacted in terms of number of complaints and therefore the percentage of Victorian complaints to total complaints is significantly down on previous years. I anticipate, subject to any unusual COVID-19 impact, that in the next year the percentage of Victorian complaints to total complaints will go back to the historical percentage of about 30% of claims and the Queensland percentage will revert back to near 20% of total claims. I note in the present quarter, the trend seems to be coming back to the historical percentages of claims for Victoria and Queensland in respect to the total percentage of complaints.



The time period for the purposes of this report is limited to the last 18 months and so ordinarily some long-term projections could be drawn just from this information. However, we would caution against this in the present circumstances where, for significant parts of the period, the impact of COVID-19 will necessarily affect the numbers. No doubt this will improve over time and be easier to assess after the COVID-19 impact, albeit that report 8 (the next report) it would seem should be affected by COVID-19 but hopefully to a lesser extent than previously.

The total complaints of 103 made in the period 1 January to 31 March 2021 is a very slight increase on the number of complaints in the previous quarter of 101. It is important to note that the number of 74 complaints for the April to June 2020 quarter is a historic low and reflects the significant impact COVID-19 had on all three States during that period. However, what is not entirely clear is the impact of COVID-19 on these numbers and in particular the matters contributing to a spike in the New South Wales numbers (see discussion earlier on the reasons for this). The spike in complaints in New South Wales, being 63 and 76 in the last two quarters respectively, has significantly reduced in this quarter. The total number of New South Wales complaints in this quarter is very low, being 41.

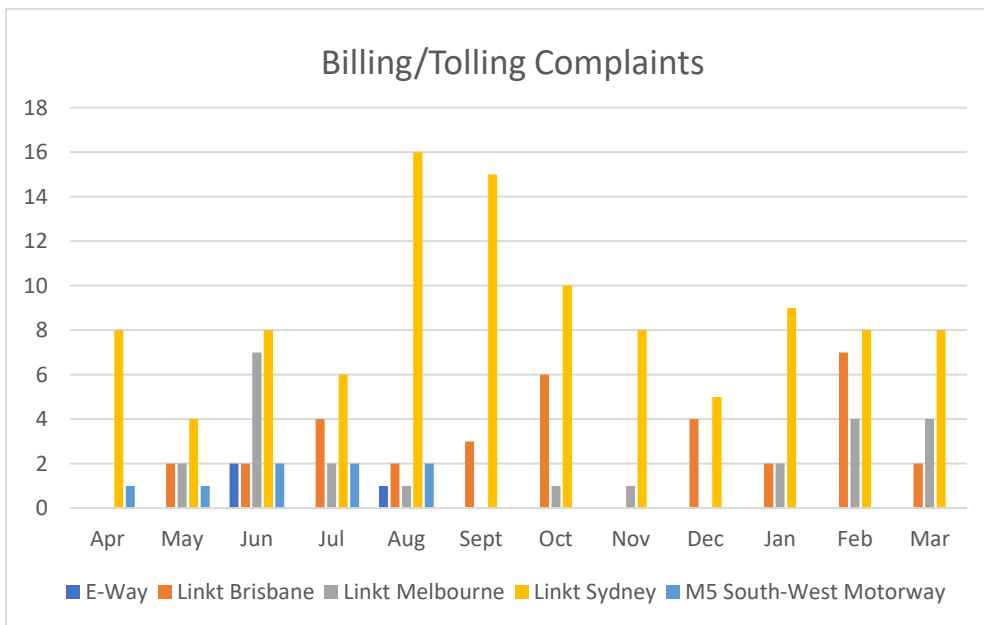
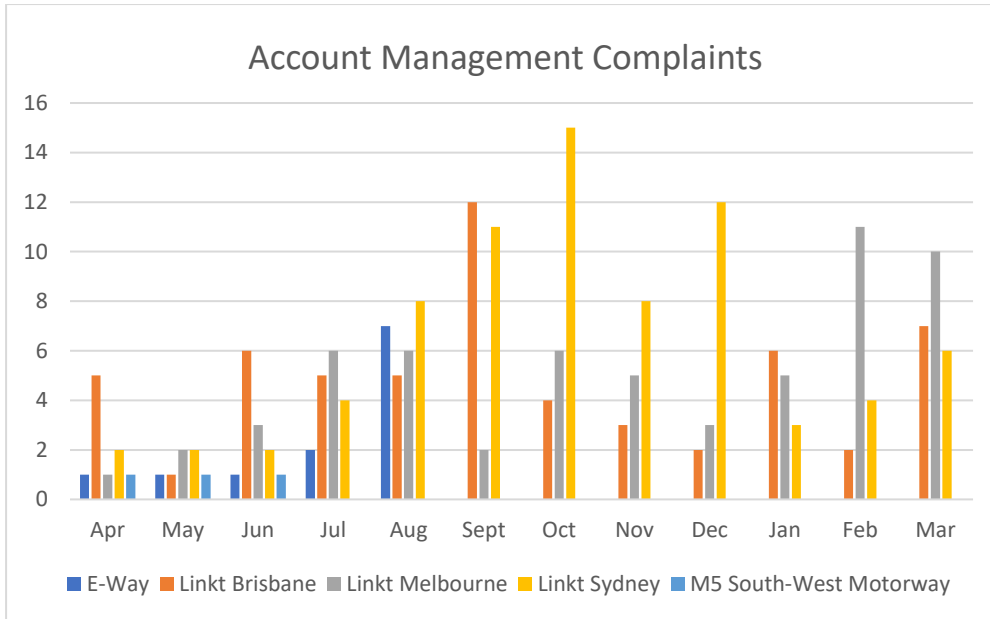
Obviously, COVID-19 has had an impact in all jurisdictions, but has had a more significant impact in some jurisdictions. For example, the number of complaints in Victoria in the January to March 2021 quarter is a significant increase on the last few quarters for Victoria, but is in my view a reflection of Victoria opening up significantly given the extent and nature of the stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures in those other quarters. To complete the comparison analysis, the Queensland complaints for January to March 2021 is 24, which is up slightly on the number of 21 in the previous quarter. These numbers of complaints are an increase on the numbers of the previous quarter.

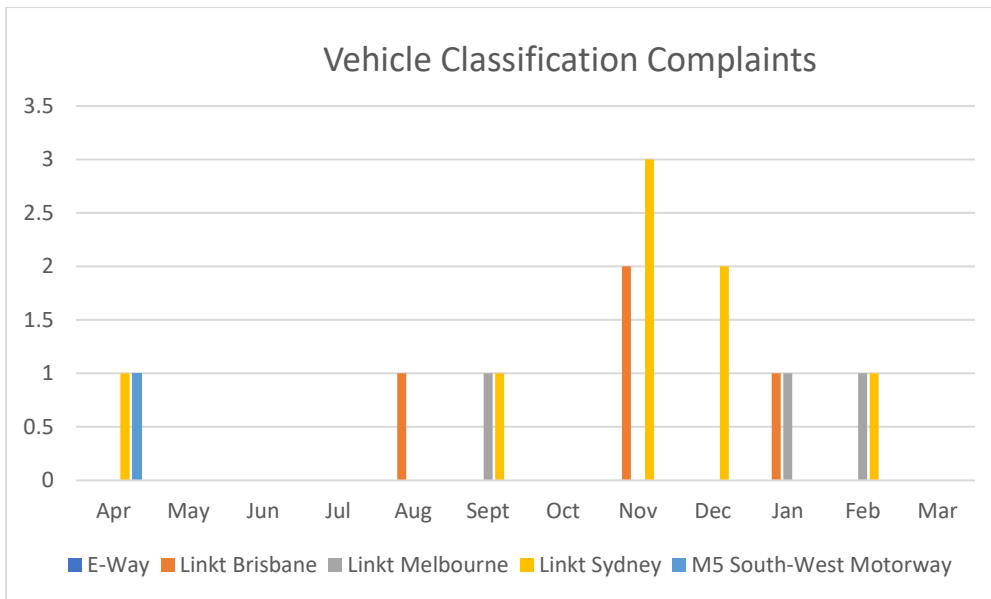
In this quarter, Queensland experienced a short three-day lockdown in Brisbane in mid-January 2021. Victoria experienced a five-day lockdown in Melbourne in early February 2021. For the most part in the quarter, State borders remained open.

Given the small set of numbers for each, the graph makes things appear more volatile than they actually are. A longer-term data set is required.

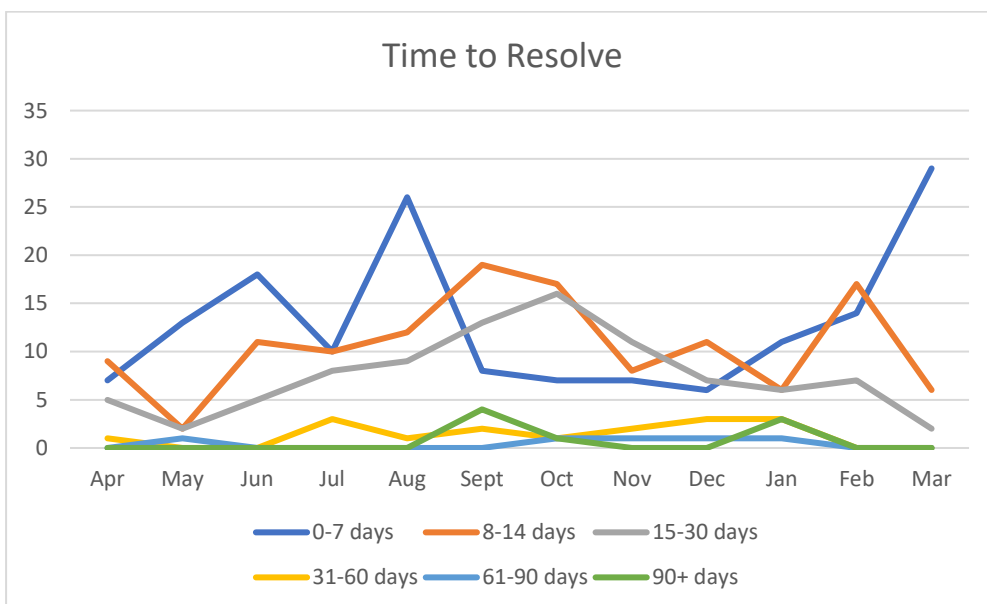
Generally, and historically, the TCO normally averages 1,000 complaints per year for the Toll Operators in the scheme and so would expect approximately 250 complaints per quarter. To receive 406 complaints in the last 12-month period is a significant reduction on the number expected. However, I note again in the last 10 months of this 12-month period the number of complaints has been impacted significantly by COVID-19. Nevertheless, all Toll Operators should be commended on the continual improvements being made to their internal complaint resolution services.

Irrespective of location, the nature of the complaints remains essentially the same. The main issues relate to billing/tolling. This is most often the application of administrative fees or infringement fines, and whether these have been properly incurred.





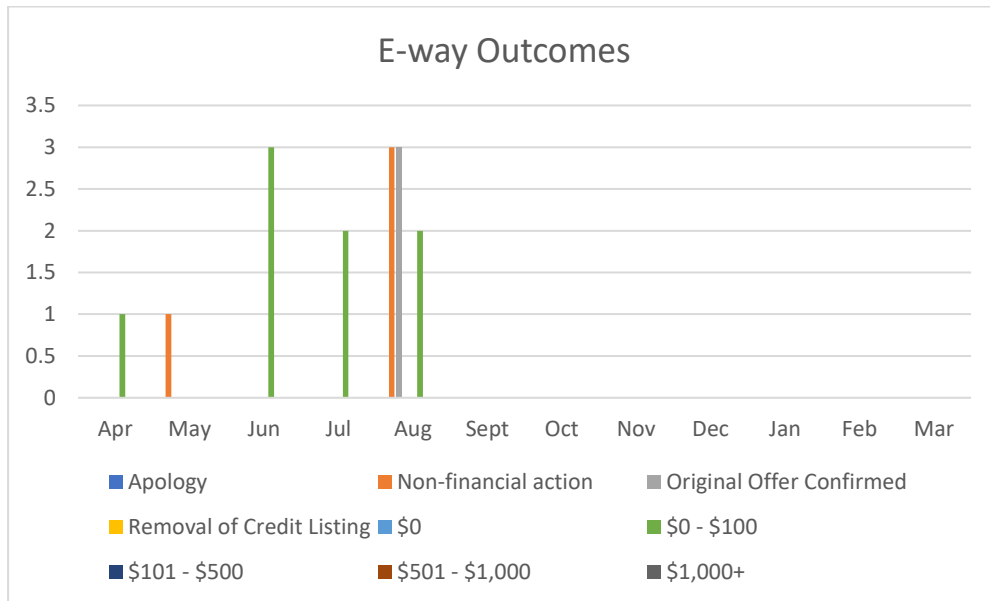
Often, once lodged, the complaints handled by the TCO are quickly resolved in discussions with the Toll Operator.



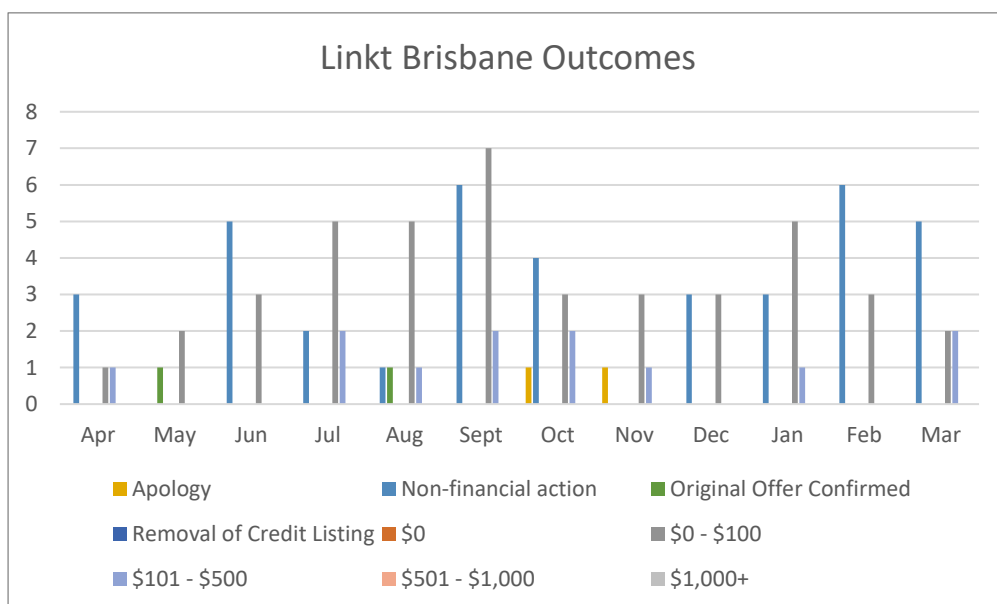
It is pleasing to note that the longer timeframes are generally coming down in comparison to September and October 2019, indicating a quicker time of resolution of complaints, particularly given the period includes various months where COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on the psyche of consumers. In addition, pleasingly in this quarter the 31-60 days category has significantly been reduced and this is markedly better than the industry standard for internal dispute resolution, being allowed to take up to 45 days. This obviously needs to be monitored carefully. In the previous quarters, there were a number of disputes that, in my view, took longer than usual to settle due to the anxiety of consumers because of COVID-19 and COVID-19 related financial issues. As discussed in the previous report, there was some angst from consumers about the tolling of M5 East and given these matters took a little longer to resolve than usual. This issue in the present quarter does not seem to be a factor. Overall, in this quarter the number of days to resolve disputes is reducing, but obviously the hard work needs to continue to ensure this is a continuing trend.

Where a resolution is achieved, the outcome can range from non-financial actions (explanations, release of information, assistance with referrals, etc.) to an acceptance of an original offer to resolve, to updating a credit listing as paid or a removal of a credit listing due to extenuating circumstances, to a financial benefit from waiver of an amount of debt or a payment.

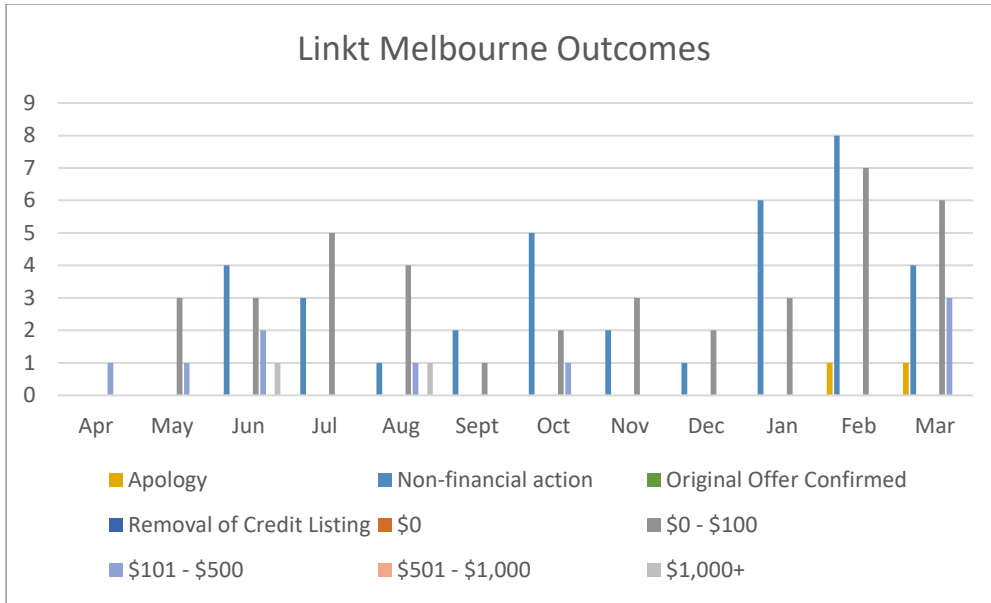
In some complaints, the financial benefit can be proportionally significant, but the instances of tens of thousands of dollars of debt are generally not able to be resolved through the TCO scheme as these levels of debt arise predominantly through the imposition of fines by State authorities, which are outside of the TCO jurisdiction.



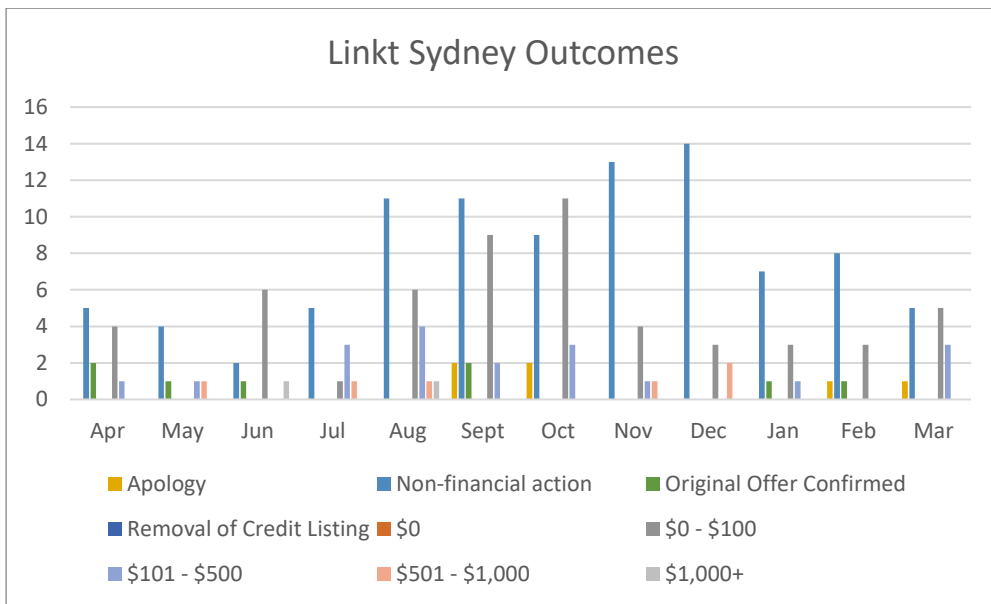
Due to the low numbers of complaints, data from E-way cannot be used to draw any conclusions at this stage.



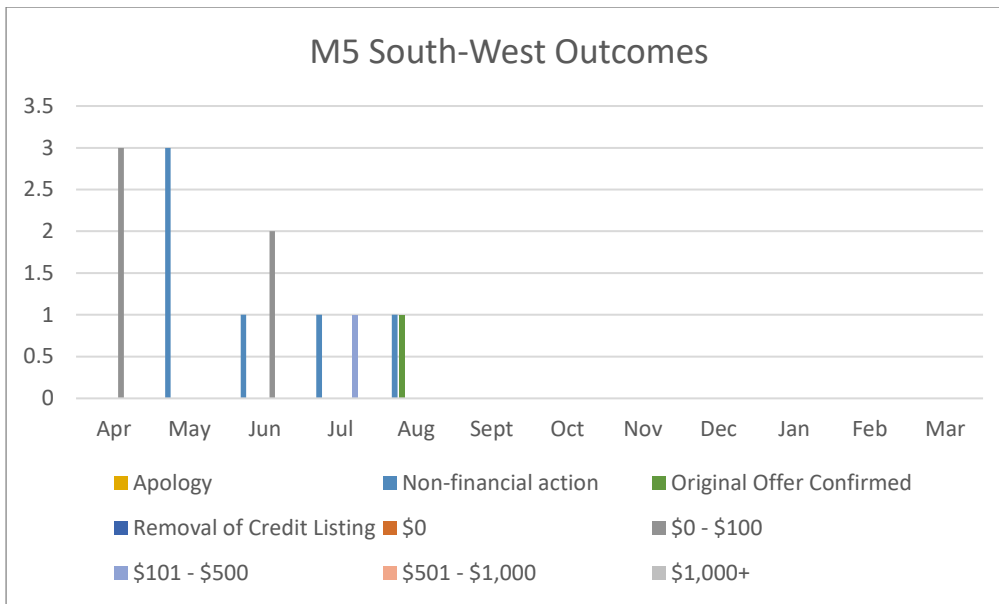
Due to the low numbers of complaints, data from Linkt Brisbane cannot be used to draw any conclusions at this stage.



Due to the low numbers of complaints, data from Linkt Melbourne cannot be used to draw any conclusions at this stage.



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Due to the low numbers of complaints, data from M5 South-West Motorway cannot be used to draw any conclusions at this stage.

ISSUES

Efforts by the Toll Operators to contact consumers is a continuing common theme in the complaints. The consequence of this is that tolls and default notices are issued for debts which have been incurred over a significant period of time before the complaint is raised. This obviously is a real source of frustration for consumers and anecdotally seems to be one particular factor that derogates against consumers wanting or being willing to settle complaints or settle complaints in a timely fashion.

As noted in the last report, the consumer claims not to have received any correspondence about any non-payment and no contact is made with them. Where there are multiple letters sent, given the overall success rates for delivery by Australia Post, albeit their service delivery times for postage has increased over the period, the likelihood is that the correspondence reaches the location to which it is addressed.

The explanation is frequently that multiple attempts were made through a variety of media (email, post, telephone, SMS) but were unsuccessful. This is often attributed to a failure to update contact details with the relevant licencing authorities.

Outdated contact information could explain the lack of success in reaching relevant consumers. However, it appears that once debt collectors are engaged, the collection agency is quickly able to locate the consumer and make contact. This implies that the consumer can be reached through the application of different approaches.

The underlying cause of why collection agencies are able to quickly locate and make contact with consumers when the Toll Operators have not been able to for long periods of time is something that Toll Operators may wish to investigate in liaison with State authorities, who maintain the licencing information for drivers.

In my view, earlier follow up and negotiation on the debt incurred will result in a greater recovery rate, a more timely recovery rate and enhanced consumer satisfaction.

FUTURE REPORTING

This interim report is the seventh version of the enhanced reporting approach and will become more sophisticated over time. Reporting will also not merely look at a particular quarter for the reporting period (although the commentary will focus on the most recent trends), but will build on the data above to provide trend analysis over the longer term. It is important to note, however, that the next reporting period, being report 8, will still be impacted by COVID-19 and hopefully on a less significant basis than for the present reporting period from January to March 2021, and certainly for the previous periods from April to December 2020.

APPENDIX 1: RAW DATA

TCO Contact Types	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Phone Calls	6	8	11	15	19	10	13	10	14	10	9	12
Faxes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Personal Appointments	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Electronic	22	18	34	31	49	46	43	30	28	30	38	37
TOTAL	28	26	45	46	68	56	56	40	42	41	47	49

TCO Consumer Locations	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
ACT	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	5
NSW	15	11	15	14	34	28	25	18	22	14	11	15	222
NT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
QLD	5	3	8	11	8	15	9	7	3	6	10	8	93
SA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TAS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VIC	2	4	10	6	6	3	9	5	3	9	15	14	86
WA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Outside Australia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Complaint Numbers	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
E-Way	1	1	3	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
Linkt Brisbane	5	3	8	9	8	15	10	5	6	9	9	9	96
Linkt Melbourne	1	4	10	8	7	3	8	6	3	9	16	14	89
Linkt Sydney	12	7	10	10	24	28	25	19	19	12	13	14	193
M5 South-West Motorway	3	3	3	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
TOTAL	22	18	34	31	49	46	43	30	28	30	38	37	406

Time Taken to Resolve	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
0-7 days	7	13	18	10	26	8	7	7	6	11	14	29
8-14 days	9	2	11	10	12	19	17	8	11	6	17	6
15-30 days	5	2	5	8	9	13	16	11	7	6	7	2
31-60 days	1	0	0	3	1	2	1	2	3	3	0	0
61-90 days	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
90+ days	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	3	0	0
TOTAL	22	18	34	31	48	46	43	29	28	30	38	37

E-way Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Non-fin action	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Original Offer Confirmed	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Removal of Credit Listing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0 - \$100	1	0	3	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$101 - \$500	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	1	0	3	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Linkt Brisbane Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Non-fin action	3	0	5	2	1	6	4	0	3	3	6	5
Original Offer Confirmed	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Removal of Credit Listing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0 - \$100	1	2	3	5	5	7	3	3	3	5	3	2
\$101 - \$500	1	0	0	2	1	2	2	1	0	1	0	2
\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	5	0	8	9	8	15	10	5	6	9	9	9

Linkt Melbourne Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Non-fin action	0	0	4	3	1	2	5	2	1	6	8	4
Original Offer Confirmed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Removal of Credit Listing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0 - \$100	0	3	3	5	4	1	2	3	2	3	7	6
\$101 - \$500	1	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	1	4	10	8	7	3	8	5	3	9	16	14

Linkt Sydney Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	1
Non-fin action	5	4	2	5	11	11	9	13	14	7	8	5
Original Offer Confirmed	2	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Removal of Credit Listing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0 - \$100	4	0	6	1	6	9	11	4	3	3	3	5
\$101 - \$500	1	1	0	3	4	2	3	1	0	1	0	3
\$501 - \$1,000	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	0

\$1,000+	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	12	7	10	10	23	26	25	19	19	12	13	14

M5 Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Non-fin action	0	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Original Offer Confirmed	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Removal of Credit Listing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$0 - \$100	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$101 - \$500	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	3	3	3	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Account Management Complaints	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
E-Way	1	1	1	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Linkt Brisbane	5	1	6	5	5	12	4	3	2	6	2	7
Linkt Melbourne	1	2	3	6	6	2	6	5	3	5	11	10
Linkt Sydney	2	2	2	4	8	11	15	8	12	3	4	6
M5 South-West Motorway	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	10	7	13	17	26	25	25	16	17	14	17	23

Billing / Tolling Complaints	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
E-Way	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Linkt Brisbane	0	2	2	4	2	3	6	0	4	2	7	2
Linkt Melbourne	0	2	7	2	1	0	1	1	0	2	4	4
Linkt Sydney	8	4	8	6	16	15	10	8	5	9	8	8
M5 South-West Motorway	1	1	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	9	9	21	14	22	18	17	9	9	13	19	14

Vehicle Classification Complaints	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
E-Way	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Linkt Brisbane	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0
Linkt Melbourne	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Linkt Sydney	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	2	0	1	0
M5 South-West Motorway	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	2	0	0	0	1	2	0	5	2	2	2	0