

TCO Review

1 January to 31 March 2022

Phillip Davies

Tolling Customer Ombudsman

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES AND MEASURES

An important part of the role of the TCO, in addition to resolving and mediating disputes, is stakeholder management and liaison and through this quarter the TCO has had numerous interactions with various key stakeholders. These interactions included, amongst other matters, responding and liaising with consumers by email, taking and being on telephone calls to various consumers, some within the TCO system and some others not within the system. In general, the consumers are contacting the TCO in respect to their dispute but also to understand the manner in which the TCO system works and the way in which the TCO can work with the parties to resolve disputes. Those consumers not within the system who contact us we seek to help by putting them on to people or the appropriate body who can assist them in resolving their issues.

On the back of my meetings in the last quarter, the Tolling Customer Ombudsman Limited (TCOL) Annual Report was distributed to the Ombudsman in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. The TCOL Annual Report was distributed widely to various consumer groups. This is done to further promote our brand, but more importantly to continue to engage with consumer groups so they are aware of our service and how we can help consumers who have difficulties in relation to the use of toll roads. The TCO will continue to openly engage with stakeholders, as an important part of the TCOL Strategic Plan is that the TCO engages with the various consumer groups in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. The TCO in subsequent quarters will continue this engagement strategy with stakeholders.

In the previous quarterly Report, I mentioned my appearance in front of the New South Wales Legislative Council Inquiry into Tolling Regimes. At the date of this report the Parliamentary Committee's findings in respect to the Inquiry are yet to be released. The TCO will monitor any outcomes or recommendations coming out of the Inquiry's findings.

Another change to stakeholder engagement was implemented during the last quarter. Rather than the TCO meeting with Transurban every six months to discuss systemic issues that are causing customers potential difficulties, these meetings are now held quarterly and this measure is enshrined in the TCO Terms of Reference.

INTRODUCTION

Operationally, during this period COVID-19 was continuing to have an impact on consumers and travel on toll roads in all jurisdictions of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria with varying degrees. However, thankfully it has had a less significant impact than previous quarters. Fortunately, during this quarter there were no lockdowns in all the States. It would appear that Queensland was affected more than New South Wales and Victoria during this quarter. The total figure of 113 complaints in this quarter is relatively low but is an increase on the number of 99 complaints in the October to December period in 2021. In Queensland in particular, the figure of 18 complaints is the lowest figure for 12 months. In Victoria, the figure of 35 complaints is an increase on last quarter and similar to the figure of 39 complaints in the January to March 2021 quarter. The figure of 60 complaints in New South Wales is substantially similar to the last two quarters but still a significant reduction on the historic claim numbers for quarters before the effects of COVID-19. The figure of 500 nationally for the 12-month period is relatively low in terms of numbers of complaints in a pre-Covid environment.

COMPLAINT RESOLUTION

The TCO has a quarterly reporting regime. This was implemented to address stakeholder feedback that trend analysis would be useful. This report provides data on the last 12 months (building on data already presented), being report 11. The TCO will keep presenting the prior 12 months of statistics on a rolling basis.

Additional information will be presented as our systems development 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.

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 TCO. It continues to be important at this time to discuss matters over the telephone with consumers so as to assess what are the “hot button” issues for consumers and what consumers perceive to be systemic issues/problems in respect to their use of toll roads. Anecdotally, calls to the 1800 number remain steady and come from all jurisdictions. However, the number of referrals required from the full-time office hours reception service (another response to constructive feedback) to the TCO has declined as customers are often able to receive a quick answer to their query from the service staff.

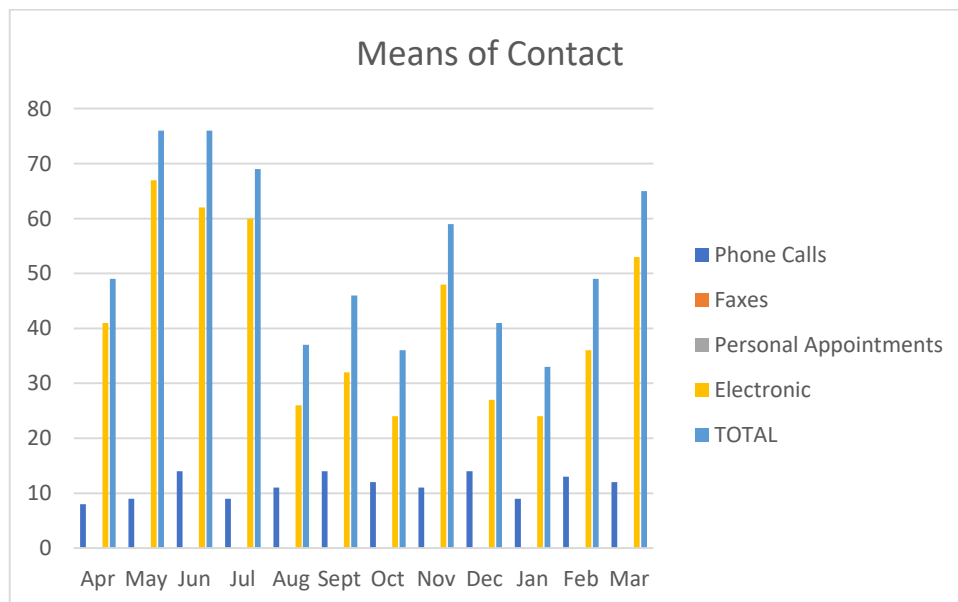
In recent interactions by consumers with the TCO, the TCO has been checking on whether the consumers found the making of the claim on the TCO website to be both easy and user-friendly. The feedback has been generally positive in this regard, but occasionally the TCO works through the process of lodging a claim over the telephone with consumers if that is

what they require. In addition, to ensure the appropriate processes are followed, the TCO asks consumers whether they have sought to resolve the matter with the Linkt Customer Resolutions team before they contacted the TCO to ensure that proper process is being followed.

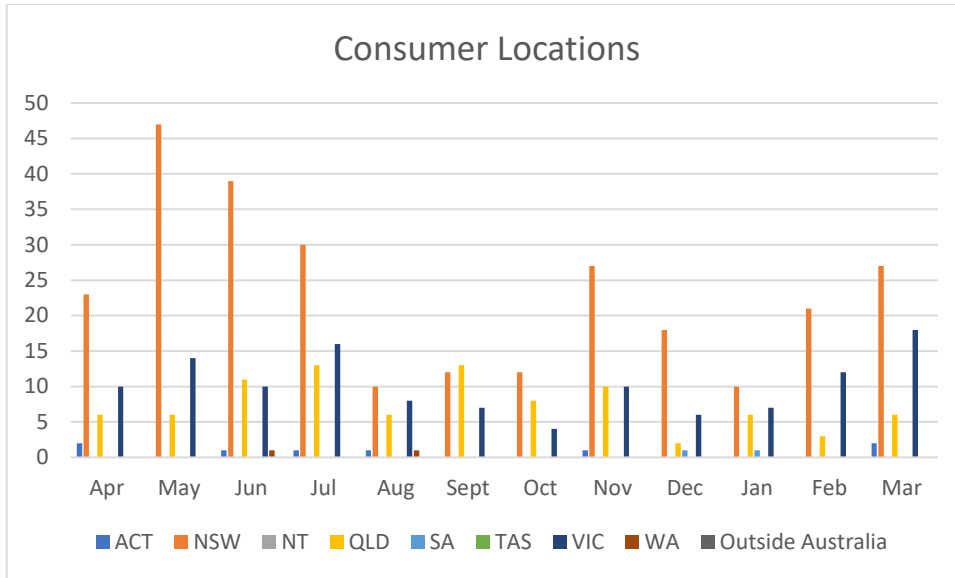
The TCO also made himself available to meet with consumers in person if required in Victoria, New South Wales and in Queensland where the TCO, subject to COVID-19 restrictions, is on the ground in Brisbane for two days per month. The TCO has also made himself available to meet by teleconference if that is more convenient for consumers.

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. Anecdotally, it would seem that COVID-19 has impacted on delivery times for Australia Post and particularly those that involve correspondence between states. This is a matter that has been raised with the TCO during telephone contact. These consumers tend to 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 for email or internet. The TCO will continue to monitor this matter going forward.

The TCO meets with the Toll Operator every quarter to discuss any “hot button” issues that, in the view of the TCO, are causing consumers concerns or any aspect of the Toll Operator’s processes or systems that have the potential to cause concerns for consumers. However, on the odd occasion, if systemic issues are identified and are causing fundamental consumer concerns, the TCO will seek to meet with the Toll Operator as soon as possible and not wait for the quarterly meeting.

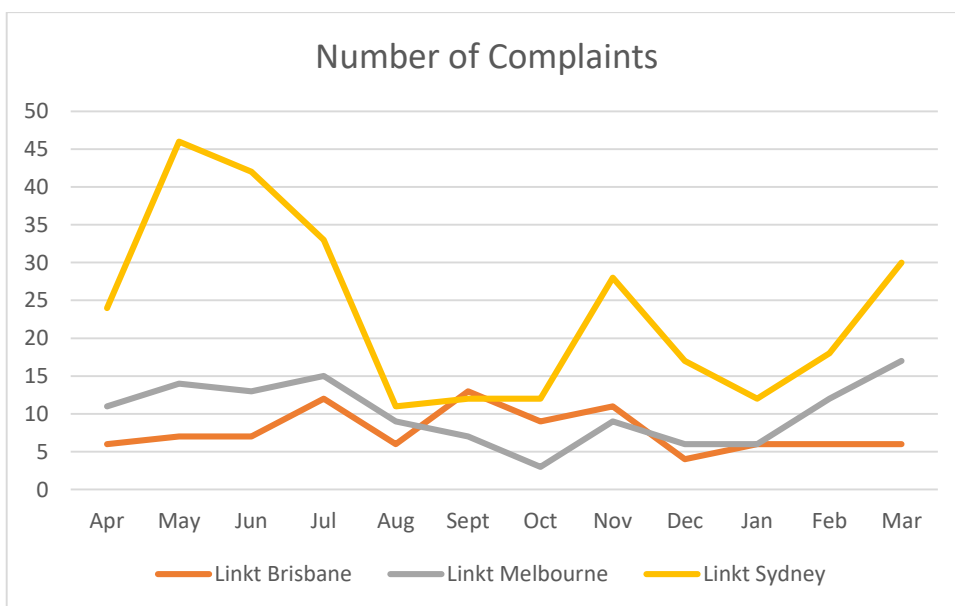


The TCO operates across three states in Australia – New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.



Complaint information

In the most recent period (ie 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 inclusive), 500 complaints were received. New South Wales consumers continue to represent approximately just over half of the TCO workload, with Victoria approximately 27% and Queensland consumers just over 20%. Last year Victoria was most impacted in terms of number of complaints, and therefore the percentage of Victorian complaints to total complaints was significantly down on previous years. In the present quarter, the number of complaints in Queensland is relatively low. As discussed in previous reports, the TCO anticipates, and the recent numbers seem again to support this view, 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 complaints and the Queensland percentage will revert back to near 20% of total complaints.



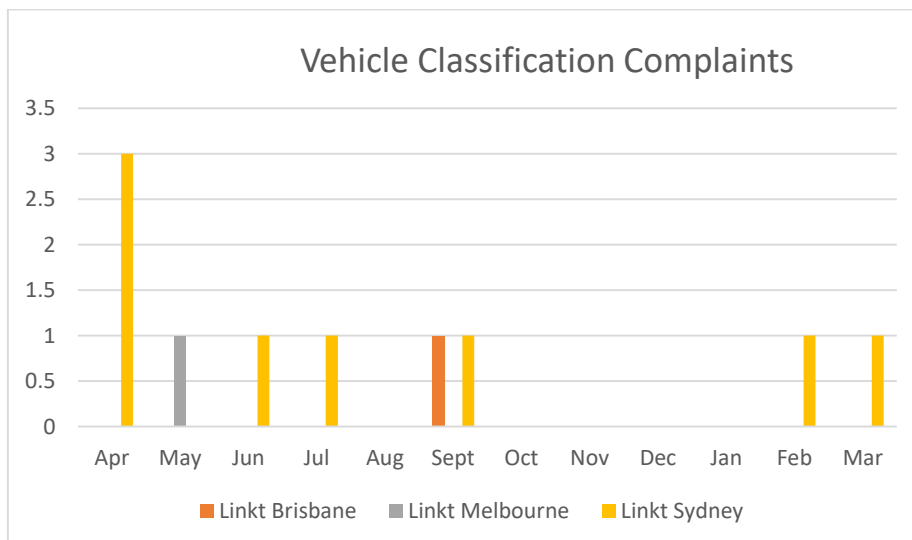
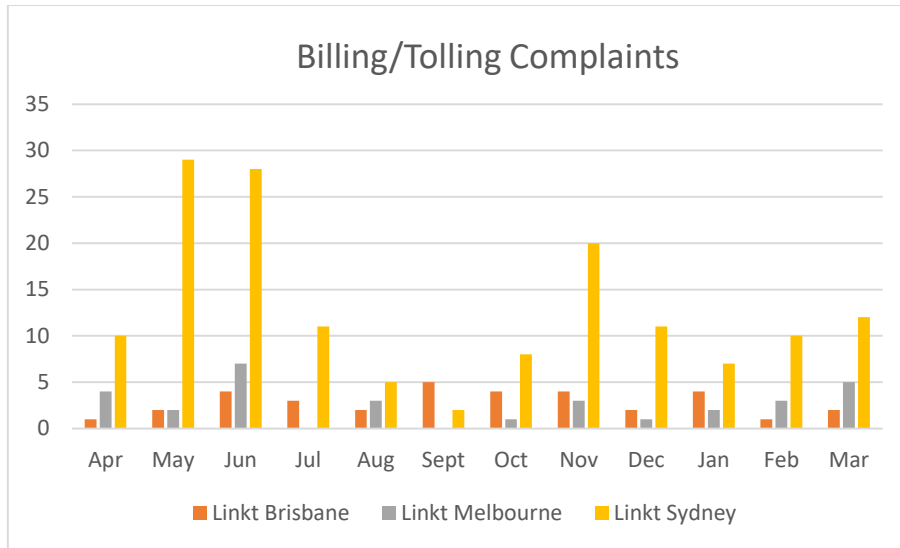
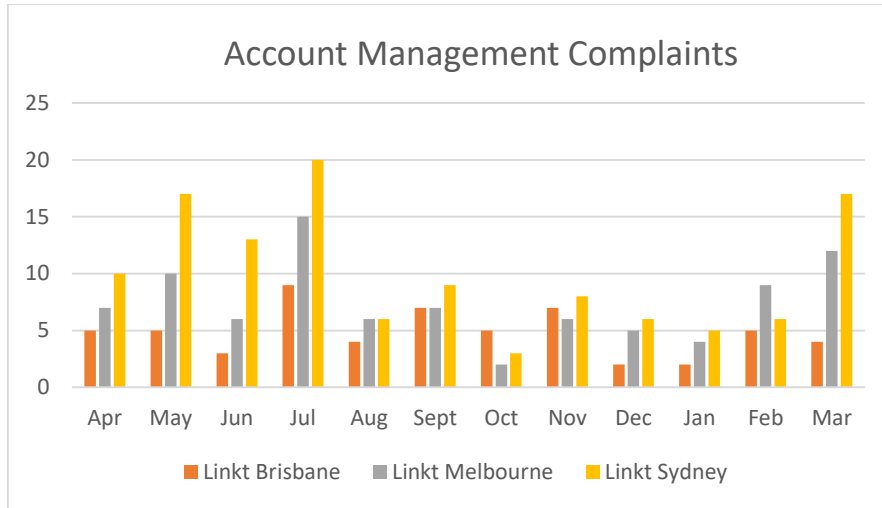
The time period for the purposes of this report is now more than two years so the view of the TCO is that some long-term projections can be drawn just from this information. However, it must be noted in that context that these conclusions must take into account significant parts of the period where the 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. Hopefully, report 12 (the next report) will be the first period in the last two years that is not significantly affected by COVID-19.

The total of 113 complaints made in the period 1 January to 31 March 2022 is an increase on the number of complaints in the previous quarter. It is important to note, however, that this number of 113 complaints is well in excess of complaints for the April to June 2020 quarter being 74, which is a historic low and reflects the significant impact COVID-19 had on all three States during that period. However, what is not clear is the impact of COVID-19 on in particular, the matters contributing to a decrease in the Queensland numbers in this quarter (see discussion earlier on the reasons for this).

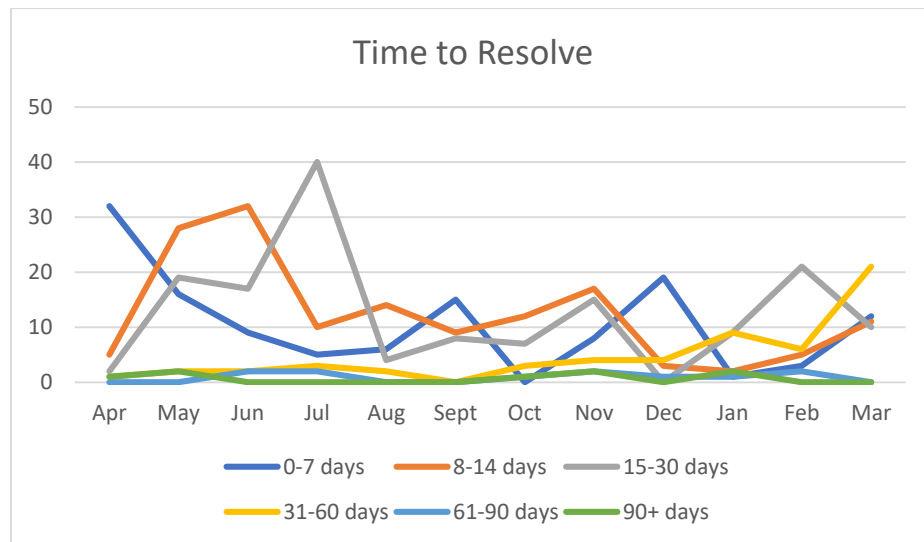
Obviously, COVID-19 still has had an impact in all jurisdictions, but has had a more significant impact in some jurisdictions. For example, the number of complaints in Victoria in the October to December 2021 quarter reduced significantly from the last two quarters. This figure is similar to the figures in Victoria during the stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures in some other quarters in 2020. However, in the present quarter the Victorian complaints are more in line with those previous quarters. To complete the comparison analysis, the Queensland complaints for the January to March 2022 quarter is a reduction on the complaints in the previous quarters. This may be a reflection of the fact that Queensland was subject to the same COVID-19 restrictions in this quarter as was the case in Melbourne and Sydney, whereas in previous quarters it had not been.

Generally, and historically, the TCO averages 1,000 complaints per year for the Toll Operator in the scheme and so would expect approximately 250 complaints per quarter. To receive 500 complaints in the last 12-month period is a significant reduction on the number expected. However, the TCO notes again in the last 12-month period the number of complaints has been impacted significantly by COVID-19. Nevertheless, the Toll Operator should be commended on the continual improvements being made to its internal complaint resolution services.

Irrespective of location, the nature of the complaints remains essentially the same. The main issues in the last year relate to billing/tolling. This is most often the application of administrative fees or infringement fines, and whether these have been properly incurred. However, the TCO notes that in the latest quarter account management complaints are higher than billing/tolling complaints. It is too early to tell whether this is a trend or a one off. The TCO will monitor this issue going forward.



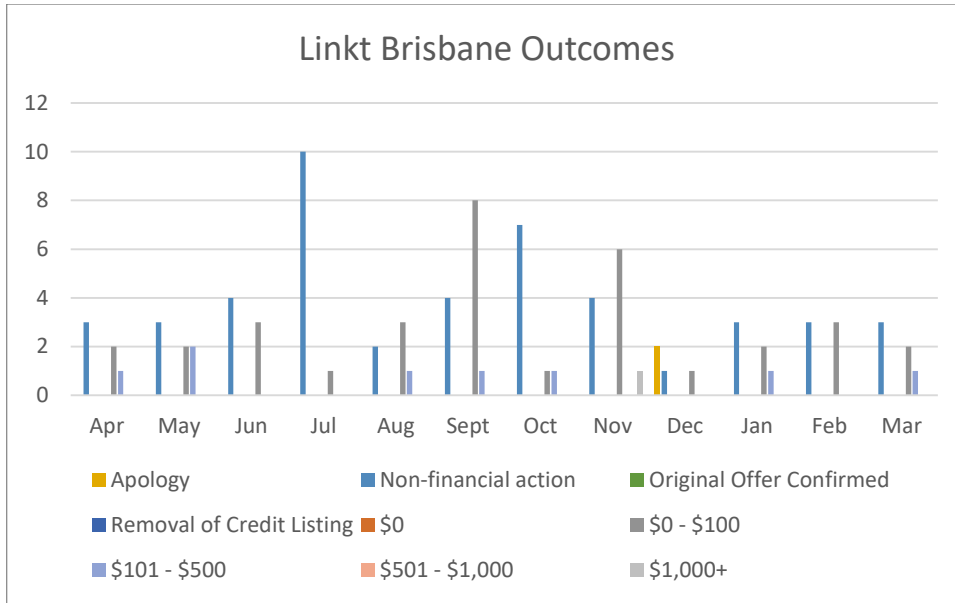
Often, once lodged, the complaints handled by the TCO are quickly resolved in discussions with the Toll Operator.



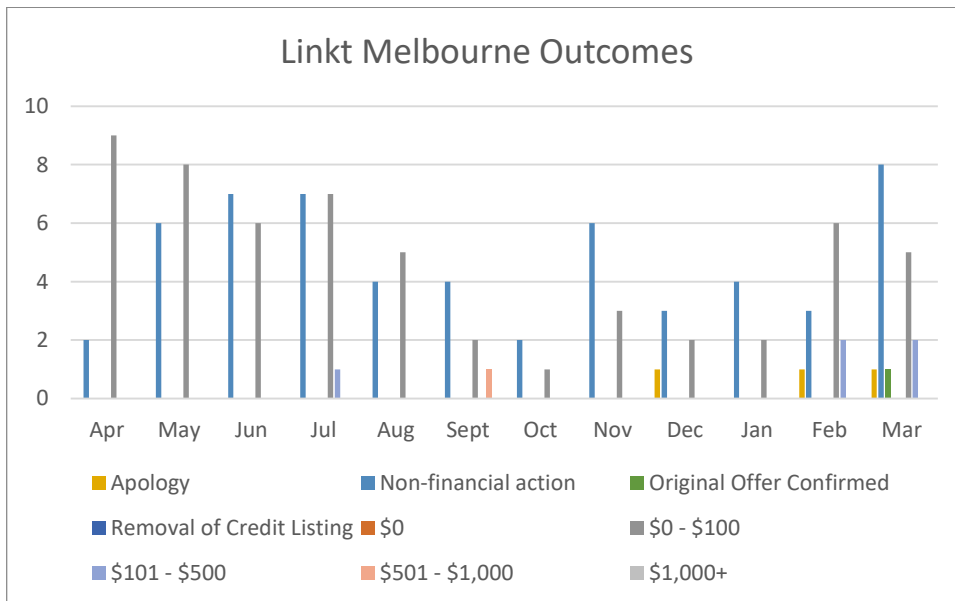
It is pleasing to note that the longer timeframes are generally coming down in comparison to late 2019 which tended to be more in the 30-60 day period. This indicates a quicker time of resolution of complaints, particularly given the period includes various months where COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on the psyche of consumers. In addition, pleasingly in this quarter the 31-60 day 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 earlier disputes that took longer than usual to settle due to the anxiety of consumers because of COVID-19 and COVID-19 related financial issues. Overall, in this quarter the number of days to resolve disputes is reducing, but obviously 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.

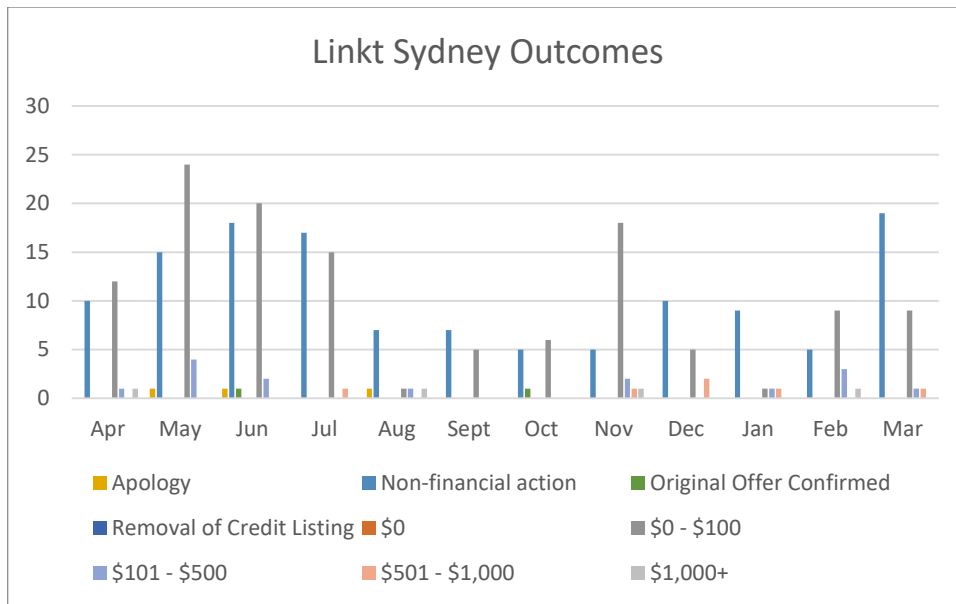
In some complaints, the financial benefit can be proportionally significant, but the instances of tens of thousands of dollars of debt are generally not able to be resolved through the TCO scheme as these levels of debt arise predominantly through the imposition of fines by State authorities, which are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



Given the data from Linkt Brisbane is now for more than 12 months, some conclusions can be drawn from the information. That is, the number of complaints is relatively steady except for the last quarter and that the numbers in respect to disputes are at the relatively minor end of the scale.



Given the data from Linkt Melbourne is now for more than 12 months, some conclusions can be drawn from the information. That is, the number of complaints in 2020 was generally down for the most part of 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, but for 2021 and 2022 the number of complaints are trending more towards historical levels, albeit slowly.



Given the data from Linkt Sydney is now for more than 12 months, some conclusions can be drawn from the information. That is, the number of complaints in 2020/2021 and in the first quarter of 2022 was generally down from the historical numbers, but less than for other jurisdictions. In the most recent quarter, complaints were substantially similar to the previous quarter but up very slightly. The figure is still a reduction on the usual numbers. Once the impact of COVID-19 is reduced, it is likely the number of disputes will be near historic levels.

ISSUES

Efforts by the Toll Operator 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 various reports over the last 24 months, 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 Operator has not been able to for long periods of time is

something that the Toll Operator may wish to investigate in liaison with state authorities, who maintain the licencing information for drivers.

As a general observation, once a debt collection agency is involved in dealing with consumers the anxiety level of the consumer rises considerably.

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 report is the 11th version of the enhanced reporting approach and will become more sophisticated over time. Reporting is not merely focused at a particular quarter in a particular 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. As discussed earlier, hopefully the next reporting period, being report 12, will not be significantly impacted by COVID-19. However, if it is, it will hopefully be on a less significant basis than for the period from March 2020 to 31 December 2021. From an anecdotal viewpoint, it seems that the signs in the present quarter are that circumstances are slowly coming back to normal in terms of toll road travel.

APPENDIX 1: RAW DATA 2021/2022

TCO Contact Types	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Phone Calls	8	9	14	9	11	14	12	11	14	9	13	12
Faxes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Personal Appointments	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Electronic	41	67	62	60	26	32	24	48	27	24	36	53
TOTAL	49	76	76	69	37	46	36	59	41	33	49	65

TCO Consumer Locations	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
ACT	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
NSW	23	47	39	30	10	12	12	27	18	10	21	27
NT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
QLD	6	6	11	13	6	13	8	10	2	6	3	6
SA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
TAS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VIC	10	14	10	16	8	7	4	10	6	7	12	18
WA	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Outside Australia	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	
Linkt Brisbane	6	7	7	12	6	13	9	11	4	6	6	6	93
Linkt Melbourne	11	14	13	15	9	7	3	9	6	6	12	17	122
Linkt Sydney	24	46	42	33	11	12	12	28	17	12	18	30	285
TOTAL	41	67	62	60	26	32	24	48	27	24	36	53	500

Time Taken to Resolve	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
0-7 days	32	16	9	5	6	15	0	8	19	1	3	12
8-14 days	5	28	32	10	14	9	12	17	3	2	5	11
15-30 days	2	19	17	40	4	8	7	15	0	9	21	10
31-60 days	1	2	2	3	2	0	3	4	4	9	6	21
61-90 days	0	0	2	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	0
90+ days	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	2	0	0
TOTAL	41	67	62	60	26	32	24	48	27	24	37	54

Linkt Brisbane Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Non-financial action	3	3	4	10	2	4	7	4	1	3	3	3
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	2	2	3	1	3	8	1	6	1	2	3	2
\$101 - \$500	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1

\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	6	7	7	11	6	13	9	11	4	6	6	6

Linkt Melbourne Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Non-financial action	2	6	7	7	4	4	2	6	3	4	3	8
Original Offer Confirmed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
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	9	8	6	7	5	2	1	3	2	2	6	5
\$101 - \$500	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	11	14	13	15	9	7	3	9	6	6	12	17

Linkt Sydney Outcomes	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Apology	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Non-financial action	10	15	18	17	7	7	5	5	10	9	5	19
Original Offer Confirmed	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	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	12	24	20	15	1	5	6	18	5	1	9	9
\$101 - \$500	1	4	2	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	3	1
\$501 - \$1,000	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1
\$1,000+	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
TOTAL	24	44	42	33	11	12	12	27	17	12	18	30

Account Management Complaints	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Linkt Brisbane	5	5	3	9	4	7	5	7	2	2	5	4
Linkt Melbourne	7	10	6	15	6	7	2	6	5	4	9	12
Linkt Sydney	10	17	13	20	6	9	3	8	6	5	6	17
TOTAL	22	32	22	44	16	23	10	21	13	11	20	33

Billing / Tolling Complaints	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Linkt Brisbane	1	2	4	3	2	5	4	4	2	4	1	2
Linkt Melbourne	4	2	7	0	3	0	1	3	1	2	3	5
Linkt Sydney	10	29	28	11	5	2	8	20	11	7	10	12
TOTAL	15	33	39	14	10	7	13	27	14	13	14	19

Vehicle Classification Complaints	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Linkt Brisbane	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Linkt Melbourne	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Linkt Sydney	3	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	3	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1