

TCO Review

1 April to 30 June 2022

Phillip Davies

Tolling Customer Ombudsman

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES AND MEASURES

The TCO continues, as part of effecting the Scheme and engaging with stakeholders, to travel to Brisbane for two days every month to ensure that Queensland consumers have an opportunity to meet face to face with the TCO. The TCO, whilst in Brisbane, is located at the Servcorp offices at level 19, 10 Eagle Street in the Brisbane CBD. A meeting with the TCO in Brisbane can be scheduled by calling 1800 145 009 or by email

admin@tollingombudsman.com.au. The TCO is also available generally for consumers in all states and territories but especially Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, by teleconference via Microsoft Teams. The TCO is also prepared to meet consumers in both Sydney and Melbourne in person if required, provided adequate notice is given to enable travel arrangements to be made and meeting rooms booked in these cities.

The TCO continues to openly engage with stakeholders as an important part of the TCOL Strategic Plan.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

The TCO is employed by an independent company, Tolling Customer Ombudsman Ltd (TCOL). The second Annual General Meeting of TCOL (AGM) is scheduled for Thursday 27 October 2022. At that AGM, the Annual Report for TCOL for the year ended 30 June 2022 is presented.

The Annual Report includes the Financial Accounts of TCOL for the year ended 30 June 2022. As was the case last year, the TCO will distribute the Annual Report 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.

In previous quarterly Reports, I mentioned my appearance in front of the New South Wales Legislative Council Inquiry into Tolling Regimes. As at 30 June 2022, the Parliamentary Committee's findings in respect to the Inquiry are yet to be released. Subsequent to 30 June 2022, the Committee Findings were released in early August 2022. The TCO will undertake a thorough examination of the Findings and report on such in the next Quarterly Report.

COVID-19 IMPACT

Operationally, during this period COVID-19 was continuing to have some 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, albeit at the time of the writing of this report there seems to be a surge of COVID-19 cases. Fortunately, during this quarter there were no lockdowns in all the states and the mandated COVID-19 measures in each state were few and far between. It would appear from the figures for the quarter that all states are coming back to some pre-COVID normality in this quarter.

- Queensland was affected more than New South Wales and Victoria during this quarter. The total figure of 131 complaints in this quarter is relatively low, but is similar to the number of complaints in the April-June 2021 quarter. It is an increase on the 113 complaints in the January to March period in 2022.
- In Victoria, the figure of 35 complaints is the same as the last quarter. There was an increase in complaints on the last quarter for both New South Wales and Queensland in this quarter.
- In New South Wales the number of complaints was 71 in this quarter and 60 in the last quarter. Similarly, in Queensland there was an increase from 18 to 25 complaints.

The figure of 461 complaints 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 12. The TCO will keep presenting the prior 12 months of statistics on a rolling basis. With the impact of COVID-19 reducing, the recent and historical data will establish trends for before COVID-19, within the COVID-19 period and back to normal circumstances beyond COVID-19.

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 continues to be very important for 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"

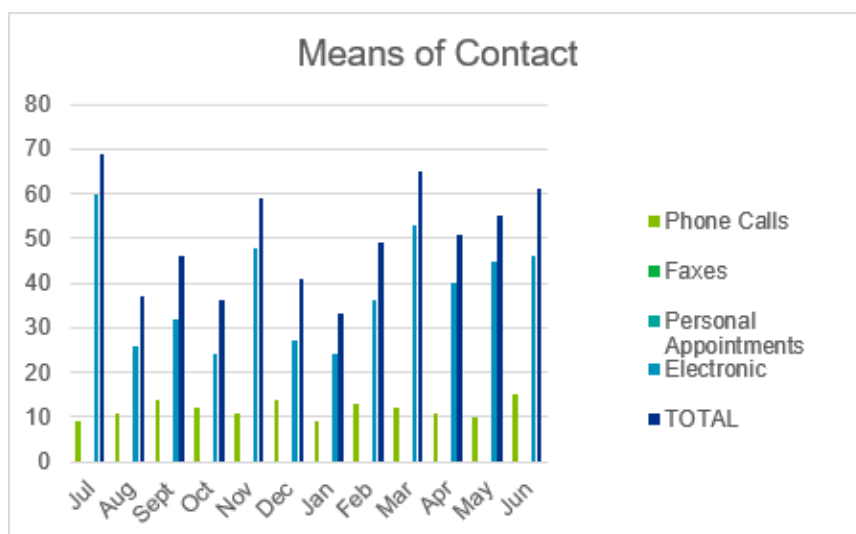
issues for consumers and what consumers perceive to be systemic issues/problems in respect to their use of toll roads. Anecdotally, calls to the 1800 number remain steady and come from all jurisdictions. However, the number of referrals from the full-time office hours reception service to the TCO has 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 Toll Operator's Customer Resolutions team before they contacted the TCO to ensure that proper process is being followed.

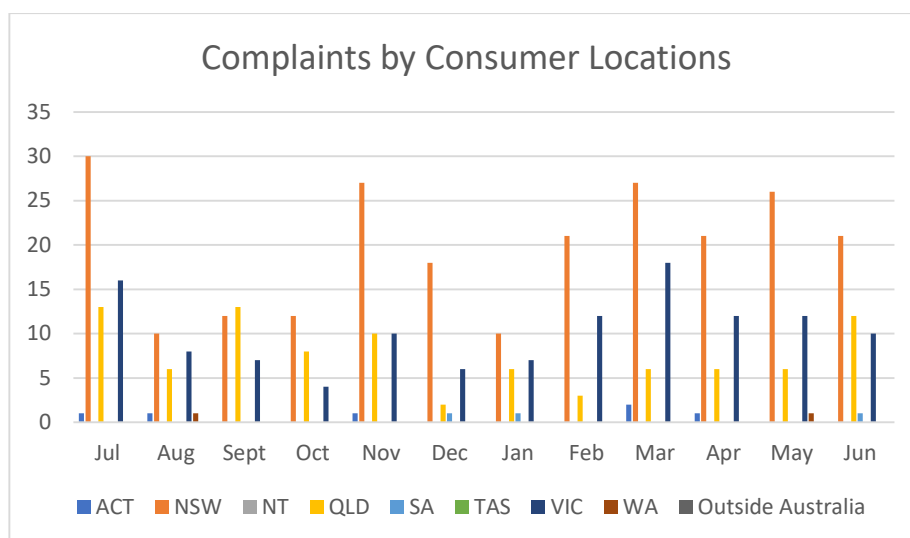
As discussed earlier, the TCO also made himself available to meet with consumers in person if required in Victoria, New South Wales and in Queensland where the TCO, subject to COVID-19 restrictions, is on the ground in Brisbane for two days per month. The TCO has also made himself available to meet by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

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 next meeting with the Toll Operator is scheduled for October 2022.



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

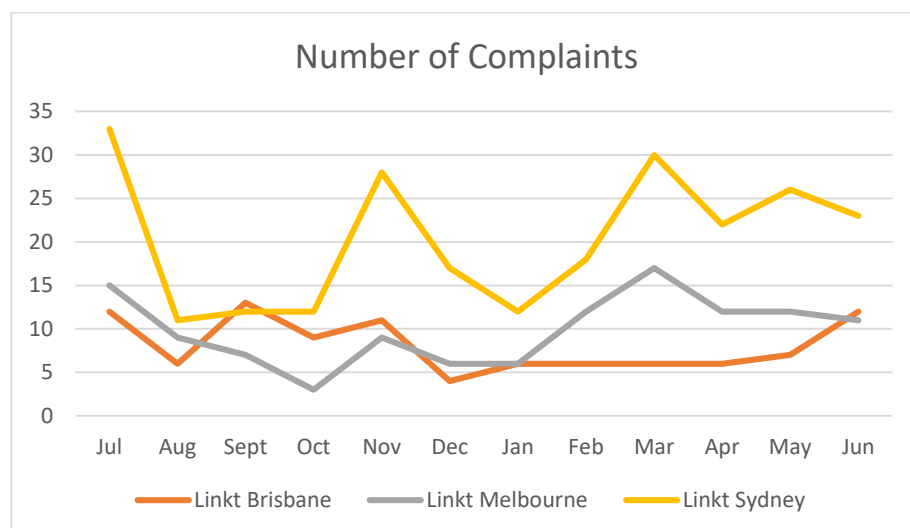


Complaint information

In the most recent 12-month period (ie 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022 inclusive), 461 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. The toll road usage numbers from the Toll Operator seem to support such a conclusion. 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 13 (the next report) will continue to be a period that is not significantly affected by COVID-19.

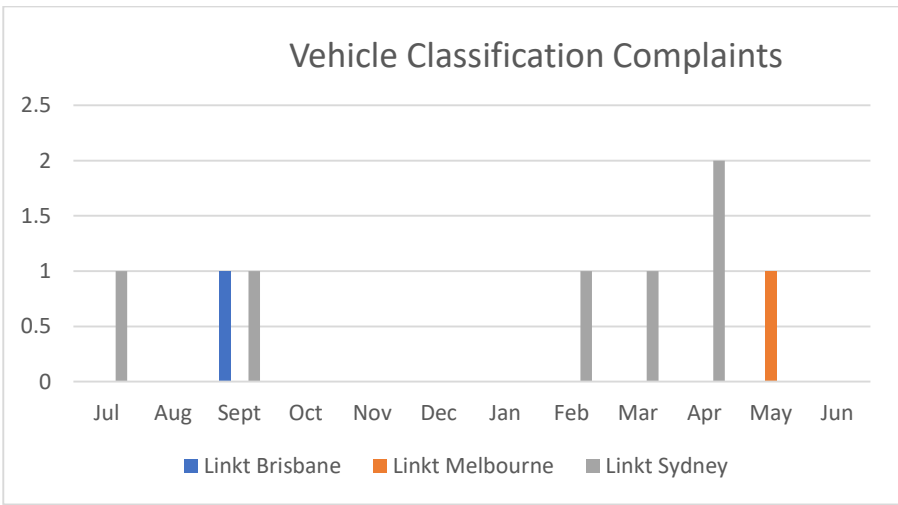
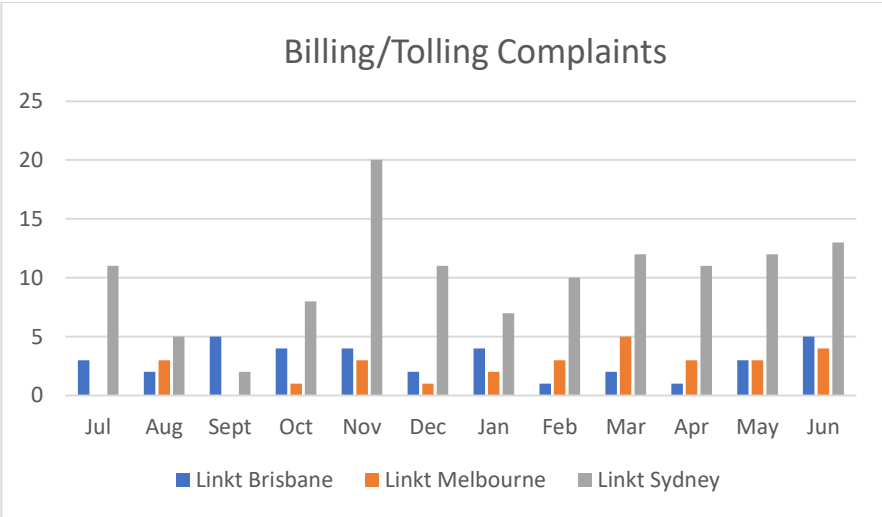
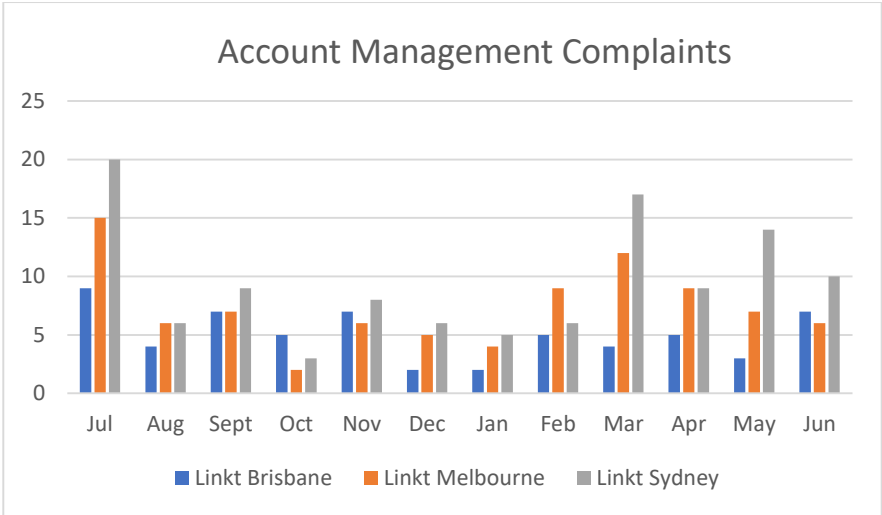
In this context we also note the refinements and improvements made by the Toll Operator in respect to the increased focus on their internal dispute resolution process. This, coupled with their refinements to the Financial Hardship mechanisms for consumers, is also having an impact.

The total of 131 complaints made in the period 1 April to 30 June 2022 is an increase on the number of complaints in the previous quarter. It is important to note, however, that this number of 131 complaints is similar to the April to June 2021 quarter, being 140. However, both these figures are well in excess of the historic low of 74 complaints in the April to June 2020 quarter. This reflects the significant impact COVID-19 had on all three states during that period and how there has been an improvement in travel on toll roads over the last 12 to 18 months.

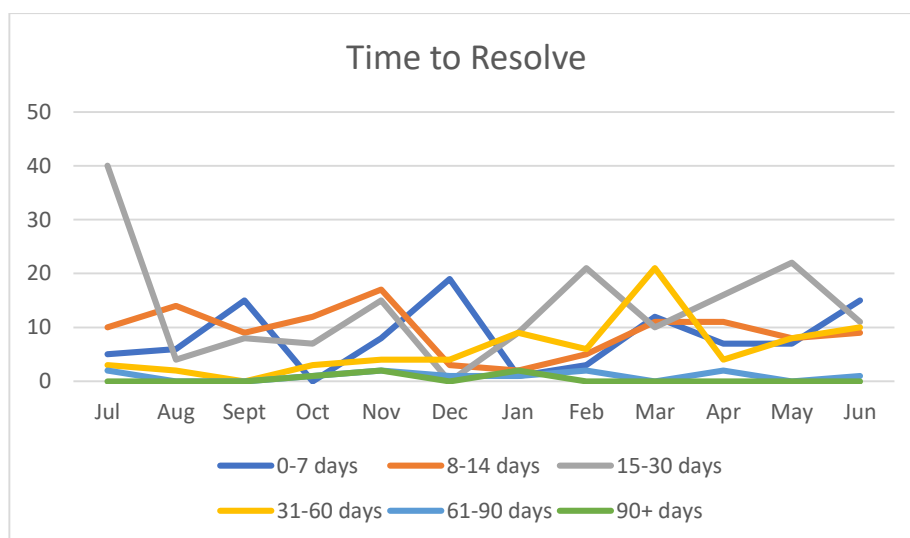
Obviously, COVID-19 still has had an impact in all jurisdictions, but has had a more significant impact in some jurisdictions. For example, the number of complaints in Victoria in the October to December 2021 quarter was 18; in the two subsequent quarters the complaints number has almost doubled at 35 complaints in each of those quarters. In the present two quarters the Victorian complaints are more in line with those previous quarters. To complete the comparison analysis, the Queensland complaints for the April to June 2022 quarter is an increase of seven on the complaints in the previous quarter.

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 461 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.

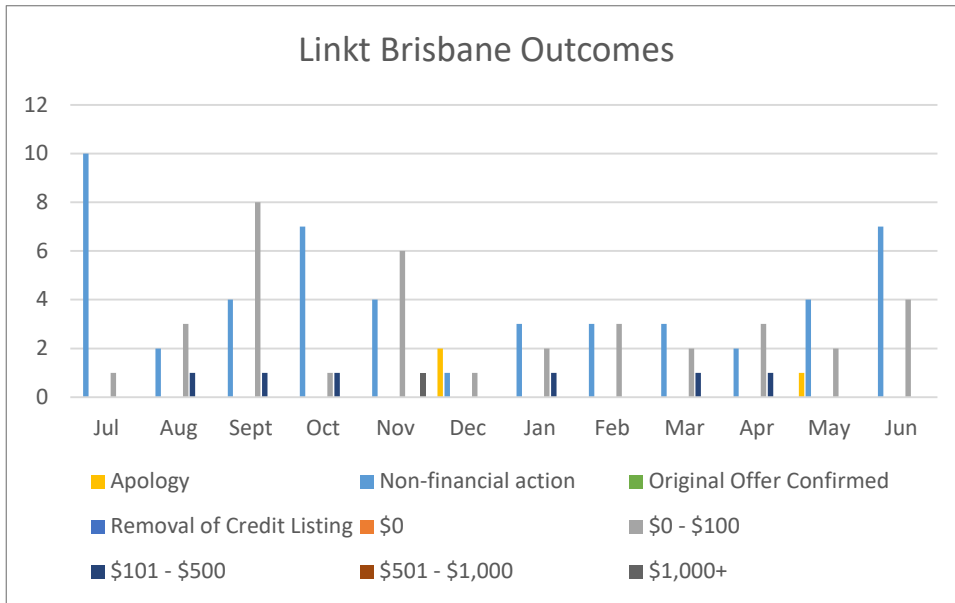


It is pleasing to note that the longer timeframes are generally coming down in comparison to late 2019, which tended to be more in the 30-60 day period. This indicates a quicker time of resolution of complaints, particularly given the period includes various months where COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on the psyche of consumers.

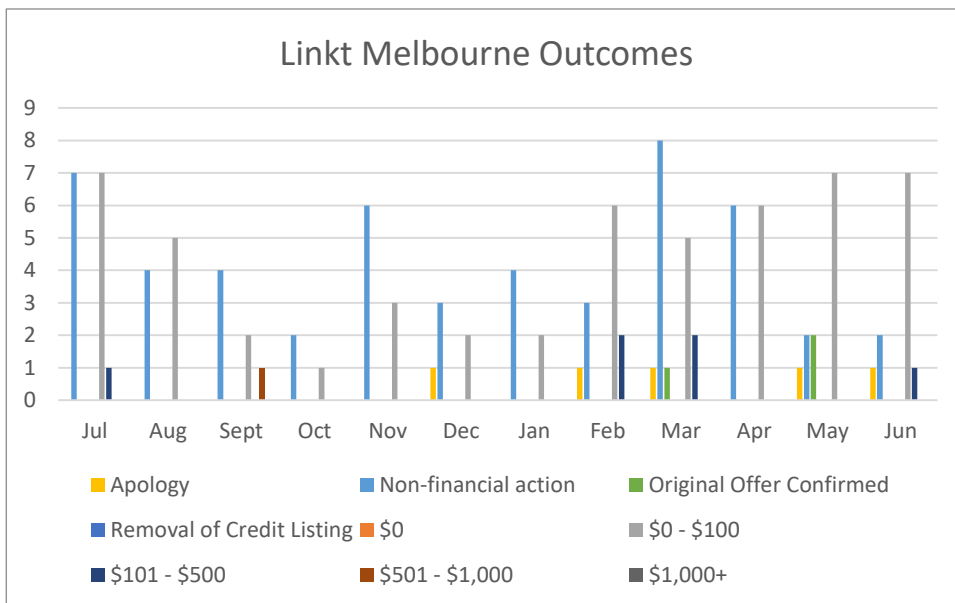
In addition, pleasingly in this quarter the 31-60 day category has significantly been reduced and this is markedly better than the industry standard for internal dispute resolution, being up to 45 days. This obviously needs to be monitored carefully. In the previous quarters there were a number of earlier 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.

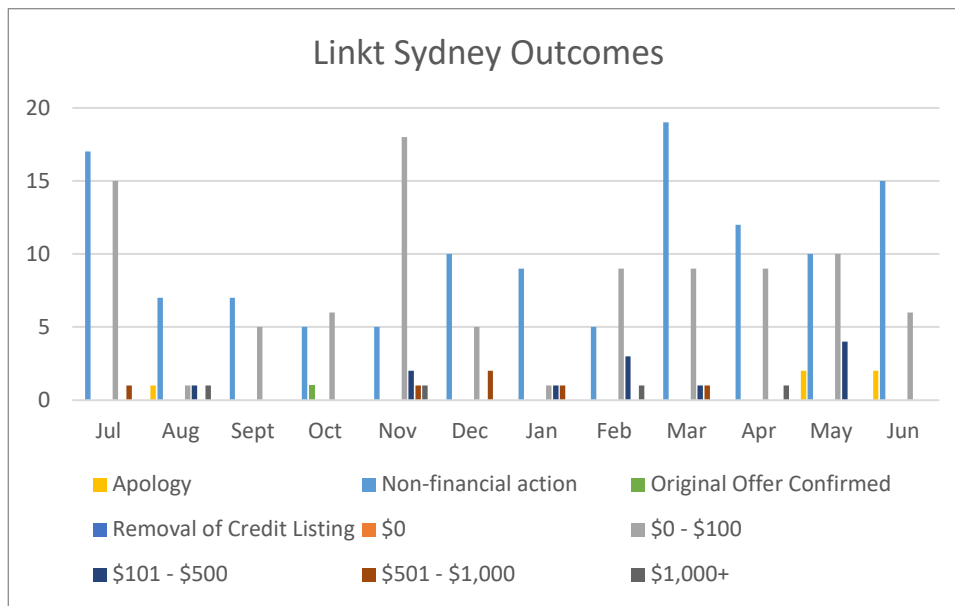
In some complaints, the financial benefit can be proportionally significant, but the instances of tens of thousands of dollars of debt are generally not able to be resolved through the TCO scheme as these levels of debt arise predominantly through the imposition of fines by state authorities, which are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



Given the data from Linkt Brisbane is now for more than a few years, 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 a few years, 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 a few years, 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 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 continues to seem to be the problem and 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 this regard, at our quarterly meetings with the Toll Operator, we continue to raise this matter with the Toll Operator as a consumer concern. There was also a discussion of this matter at the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry when I appeared before the inquiry.

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 12th 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 13, will not be significantly impacted by COVID-19. However, if it is, it will hopefully be on a much less significant basis than for the period from March 2020 to 31 December 2021.

The toll road usage numbers from the Toll Operator seem to indicate that the signs in the present quarter support the contention that circumstances are coming back to normal in terms of toll road travel.

APPENDIX 1: RAW DATA 2021/2022

TCO Contact Types	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	
Phone Calls	9	11	14	12	11	14	9	13	12	11	10	15	
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	60	26	32	24	48	27	24	36	53	40	45	46	
TOTAL	69	37	46	36	59	41	33	49	65	51	55	61	
TCO Consumer Locations	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	
ACT	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	2
NSW	30	10	12	12	27	18	10	21	27	21	26	21	52
NT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
QLD	13	6	13	8	10	2	6	3	6	6	6	12	32
SA	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
TAS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VIC	16	8	7	4	10	6	7	12	18	12	12	10	31
WA	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Outside Australia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Complaint Numbers	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	
Linkt Brisbane	12	6	13	9	11	4	6	6	6	6	7	12	98
Linkt Melbourne	15	9	7	3	9	6	6	12	17	12	12	11	119
Linkt Sydney	33	11	12	12	28	17	12	18	30	22	26	23	244
TOTAL	60	26	32	24	48	27	24	36	53	40	45	46	461
Time Taken to Resolve	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	
0-7 days	5	6	15	0	8	19	1	3	12	7	7	15	98
8-14 days	10	14	9	12	17	3	2	5	11	11	8	9	111
15-30 days	40	4	8	7	15	0	9	21	10	16	22	11	163
31-60 days	3	2	0	3	4	4	9	6	21	4	8	10	74
61-90 days	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	0	2	0	1	12
90+ days	0	0	0	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	5
TOTAL	60	26	32	24	48	27	24	37	54	40	45	46	
Linkt Brisbane Outcomes	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	
Apology	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	
Non-financial action	10	2	4	7	4	1	3	3	3	2	4	7	
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	1	3	8	1	6	1	2	3	2	3	2	4	
\$101 - \$500	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	

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

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

Linkt Sydney Outcomes	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Apology	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Non-financial action	17	7	7	5	5	10	9	5	19	12	10	15
Original Offer Confirmed	0	0	0	1	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	15	1	5	6	18	5	1	9	9	9	10	6
\$101 - \$500	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	3	1	0	4	0
\$501 - \$1,000	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	0	0
\$1,000+	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	33	11	12	12	27	17	12	18	30	22	26	23

Account Management Complaints	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Linkt Brisbane	9	4	7	5	7	2	2	5	4	5	3	7
Linkt Melbourne	15	6	7	2	6	5	4	9	12	9	7	6
Linkt Sydney	20	6	9	3	8	6	5	6	17	9	14	10
TOTAL	44	16	23	10	21	13	11	20	33	23	24	23

Billing / Tolling Complaints	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Linkt Brisbane	3	2	5	4	4	2	4	1	2	1	3	5
Linkt Melbourne	0	3	0	1	3	1	2	3	5	3	3	4
Linkt Sydney	11	5	2	8	20	11	7	10	12	11	12	13
TOTAL	14	10	7	13	27	14	13	14	19	15	18	22

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

Infrastructure / Signage Traffic Management Complaints	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Linkt Brisbane	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Linkt Melbourne	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Linkt Sydney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0