

Quarterly Update 3: 1 January–31 March 2020

Changes to Commonwealth Ombudsman services due to COVID-19 pandemic

As part of our commitment to the health and safety of our staff, many of whom are working remotely or who have been redeployed to other public service agencies so that government resources are focused on the delivery of essential services to the Australian public, it may take longer than usual for the Office to respond to complaints. Our complaint service is continuing within this new environment but we needed to make some changes in order to respond to the demands on our services.

Our phone service has been temporarily limited to 9am to 12 noon Australian Eastern Standard Time, Monday to Friday. During this time we are encouraging complainants to lodge complaints through our online [complaint form](#).

Quarterly update at a glance

4.8% increase in
complaints received



compared
to the same time last year

This quarter we
received
761 complaints
and
finalised
819 complaints

How complaints were finalised



Postal industry complaints in a time of Bushfires and COVID-19 disruption

During 1 January–31 March 2020 we received 761 postal industry complaints, which represented an increase of 4.8 per cent compared to the same period last year. In the 1 October–31 December 2019 quarter we received 710 complaints.

This quarter, Australia's postal industry has been affected by two major events. The bushfires disrupted services from late 2019, with post offices closed and deliveries suspended throughout significant parts of the country. The Office received relatively few complaints from customers about bushfire related disruptions. There seemed to be a general appreciation that postal operators were doing the best they could to maintain services under difficult circumstances, nevertheless there was an increase in complaints in postal delays during the quarter.

Disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the shutdowns affecting all of Australia occurred at the end of the reporting period. Consequently, this didn't lead to a significant increase in complaints in the quarter. Complaints were trending downwards during the quarter as postal services resumed normal operations after the bushfires were brought under control and the typical Christmas period peak in postal service usage passed.

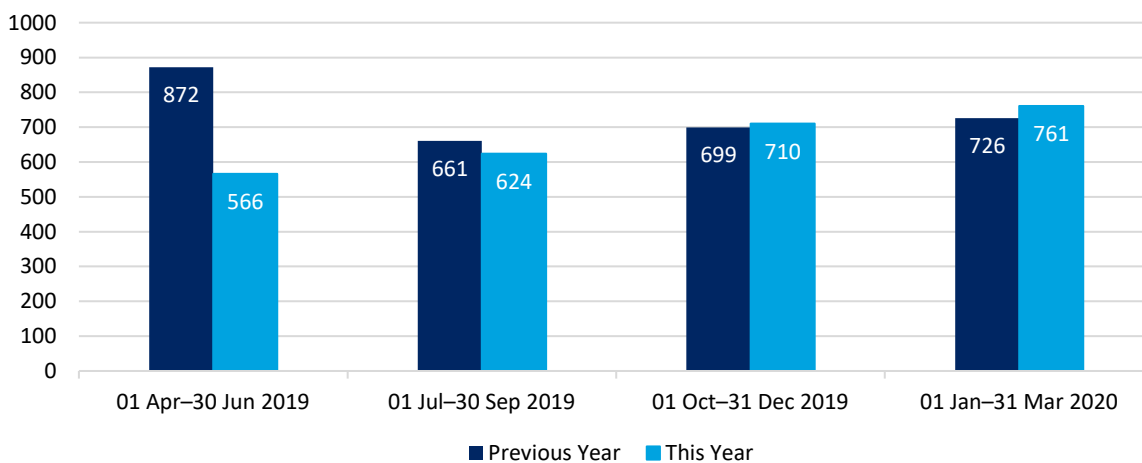
Since the shutdown on 23 March 2020, there has been a significant increase in demand for delivery services as Australians remain home and utilise online shopping in far greater volumes. We anticipate this change and the challenges of operating postal services during the COVID-19 pandemic will be reflected in an increased level of complaints in the next quarter.

The Office, like many organisations, has sought to adapt its processes to respond to the most important needs in the community during this time. Postal services are an essential service and so all complaints will be considered and managed appropriately, but we will prioritise postal complaints that are identified as urgent due to the customer's circumstances. For example, a complaint from a person who is unable to leave their home and requires delivery of medications, or a person that requires delivery of an item necessary for them to work from home may take priority over other matters.

Complaints received

Complaints received by quarter

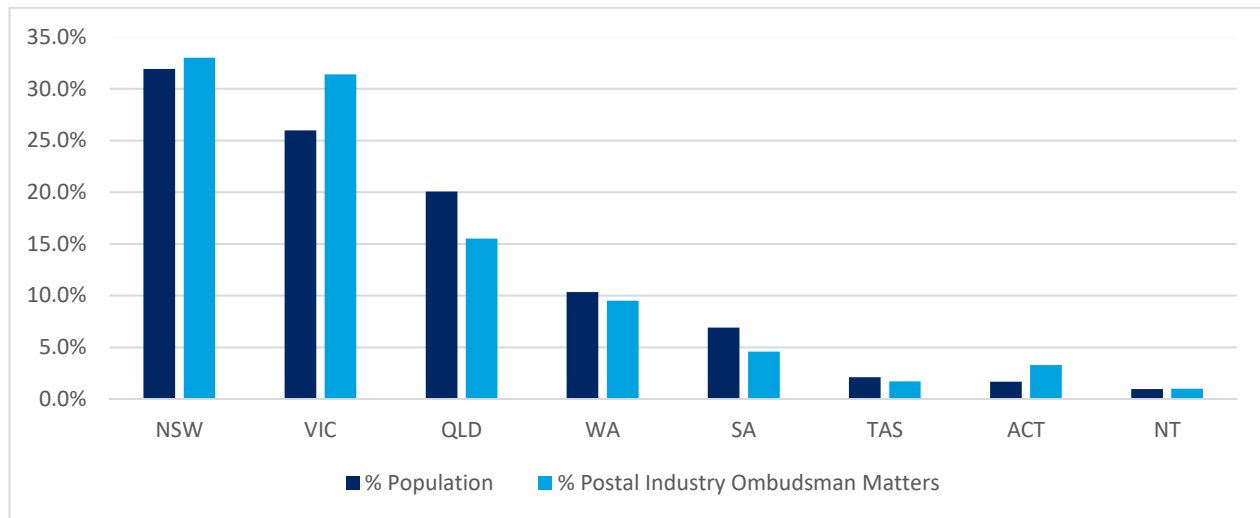
Figure 1—Complaints received by quarter



Complaints by state and territory

As outlined in Figure 2 below, consumers in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales were more likely to have a complaint about their postal operator, compared to consumers in other states and territories.

Figure 2—Complaints by state/territory



Complaints by postal operator

During 1 January–31 March 2020 we received 761 complaints, comprising:

- 747 complaints (98 per cent) about Australia Post
- 13 complaints (1.7 per cent) about StarTrack
- 1 complaint about Federal Express.

Complaints finalised

The Office uses a number of different processes to manage postal industry complaints. A matter is finalised when no further action is being taken with the complaint.

During 1 January–31 March 2020 the Office finalised all postal industry complaints within our service standards, as follows:

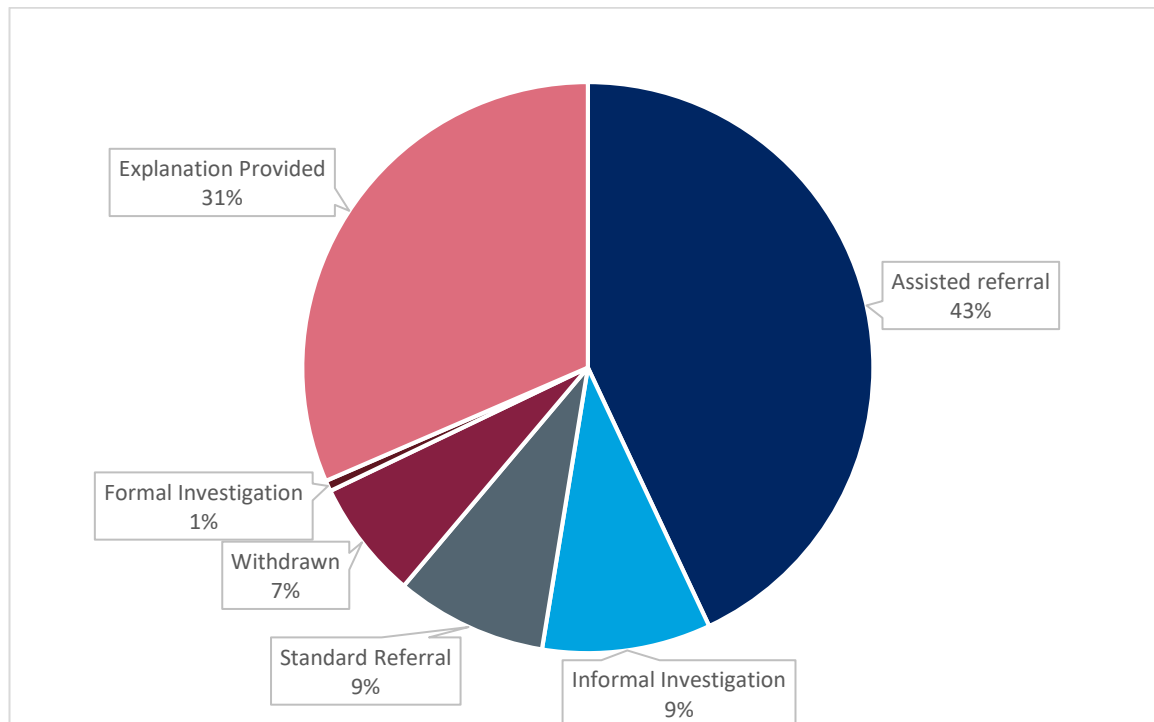
Complaints finalised		
73.6%	Within 14 days	65%
92.3%	Within 45 days	85%
97.6%	Within 90 days	95%
100%	Within 12 months	99%

Actions taken to finalise complaints

During 1 January–31 March 2020 we finalised 819 postal industry complaints, which represented a 10.5 per cent increase compared to the same period last year. The improvement in case handling is a result of a change to our processes from 1 July 2019, where we commenced referring some matters directly to postal operators.

For further information about the different types of actions the Office uses to finalise postal complaints refer to [Quarterly Update 1](#).

Figure 3—How complaints were finalised

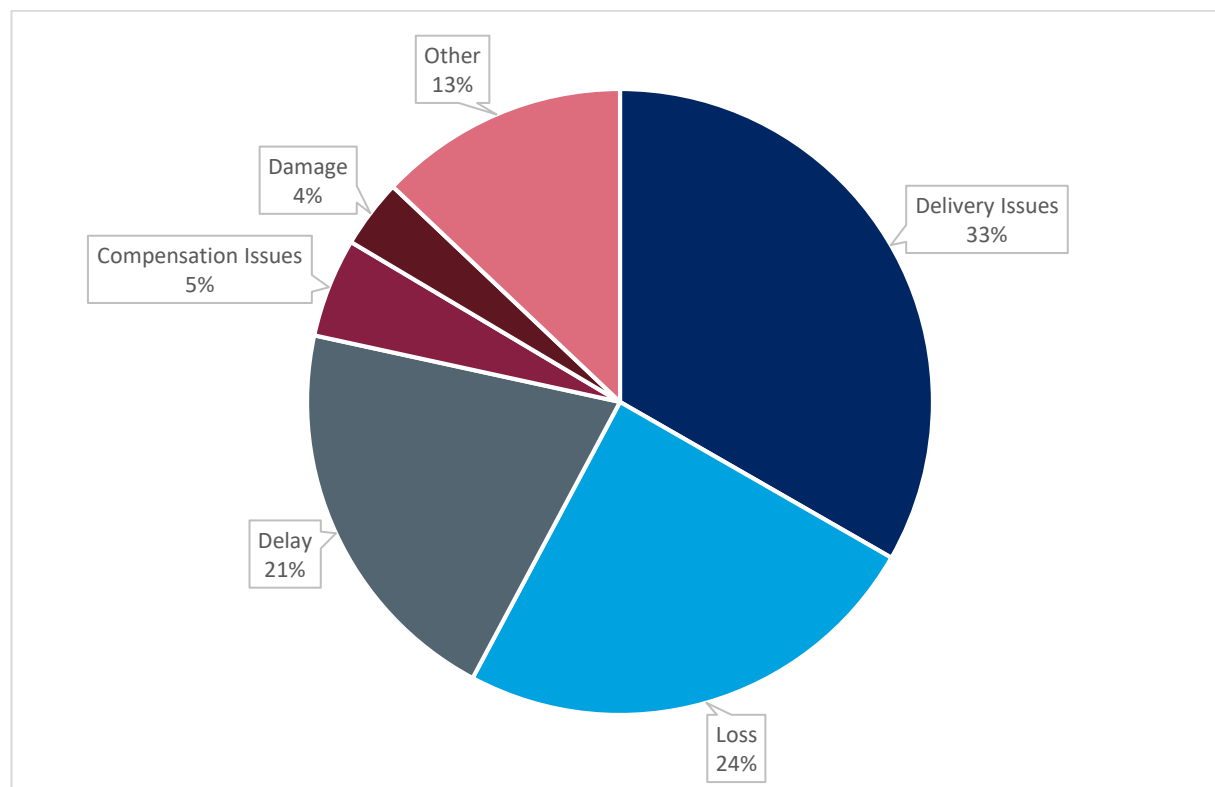


Complaint issues

The types of complaints we received are explained below:

- Delivery Issues—see issue in focus below for a discussion of the delivery issue complaints we receive.
- Loss—complaints where the primary issue was that an article was lost in transit by the postal operator.
- Delay—complaints that relate to letters or parcels that have been delivered later than expected.
- Compensation—complaints that primarily concern a compensation request. Most complaints about a postal operator also include a request for compensation, so this does not represent all complaints that include a compensation request.
- All other—includes complaints about Australia Post concerning services other than postal or similar services and matters of administration that are considered under the Commonwealth Ombudsman jurisdiction. This might include services provided in a postal retail outlet (e.g. retail products, bill payment, passport services), actions of staff, the handling of requests under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*, tenders and contracts and some pre and post-employment matters. These complaints represented six per cent of postal complaints to the Office.

Figure 4—Complaint issues



Issue in focus: Postal Delays

During 1 January–31 March 2020 we received 169 (21 per cent) complaints about delays to postal services. This was an increase from 105 (15 per cent of total complaints) in the previous quarter. The problems experienced by customers were attributable to the disruption caused to postal operations by the bushfires, with many roads and post offices closed and in some areas postal deliveries suspended to ensure the safety of staff.

In addition to the bushfires, we normally see an increase in postal complaints around Christmas due to significant increases in retail and business parcel volumes due to online shopping.

Consumers tend to complain to the Office if they are unable to receive a timely response to an enquiry about the whereabouts of a delivery. They may also complain if a delivery takes longer, or is routed differently, compared to what they have experienced in the past.

Nevertheless, considering the scale of the disruptions, the number of complaints received about delays was relatively modest, and complaints about other issues such as delivery issues and postal loss were relatively stable.

Disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the shutdowns affecting all of Australia occurred at the end of the quarter and consequently are not reflected in our complaint figures. Most complaints about postal delays occurred in January and moderated to more normal levels by the end of March. We will report on the effect of COVID-19 to postal delays, and other consumer issues in Quarterly Update 4 for the 1 April–30 June 2020 period.

Case Study— Mail hold service

Jenny* sent a parcel full of sentimental items back to Australia while on holiday overseas. Jenny also had a mail hold in place for any mail and parcels that were sent to her residential address. The mail hold failed and a collection card was left advising the parcel was awaiting collection at her local Post Office. Once she returned from overseas she attended the Post Office and was advised that the parcel had been returned to sender as no one had collected it.

Jenny complained to the postal operator but was dissatisfied with their response so she contacted our Office. We made enquiries of the postal operator who reviewed the information it had on record and acknowledged the mail hold failed. They contacted the overseas postal operator who eventually located the parcel and sent it back to her. Unfortunately, it was lost on the way to Australia this time.

The Australian postal operator acknowledged that the parcel would not have been lost in the first place if Jenny's mail hold had not failed and so it agreed to pay compensation for the loss of the parcel and a postage refund.

**Names and some details have been changed for privacy reasons.*

Case Study – Delivery records

Jose* purchased a musical instrument online and tracking showed that the parcel was delivered, however he had not received it.

Jose contacted the postal operator to see if the parcel could be located or if he would be eligible for compensation if the item had been lost. They investigated Jose's complaint, but reiterated that it had been delivered, specifically into his letterbox. Jose also contacted the musical retailer but they were not willing to assist him because it was shown as delivered.

Jose remained dissatisfied with the operator's response and contacted our Office for assistance. He advised us that in his view, it was impossible for the package containing the musical instrument to fit into his letterbox.

We contacted the postal operator who reviewed Jose's case. They advised that their records showed that the package was delivered and the delivery officer could recall placing it into the letterbox. They also confirmed the package could fit into the letterbox by visiting Jose's premises and measuring the letterbox against the package dimensions provided by the sender.

Our Office considered that the postal operator had taken appropriate steps to investigate Jose's complaint and had provided a reasonable response to him. We finalised Jose's complaint and explained the reasons we thought the postal operator's response was acceptable. We also advised him that he should see if there was any compensation for his loss of the musical instrument available from the online seller or payment handler.

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Data

The data in this update is for the period 1 January–31 March 2020. Our data is dynamic and regularly updated as new information comes to light. For this reason, there may be minor differences in data when compared to what was reported in the last quarterly update. Previous quarterly updates are available at the Ombudsman's [website](#).

More information is available at ombudsman.gov.au/How-we-can-help/postal-industry-ombudsman