

AIRLINE CUSTOMER ADVOCATE

1 January – 31 December

2021

Annual Report

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# Advocate's Foreword

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This Annual Report contains details about the total number of eligible complaints received and finalised by the Airline Customer Advocate, the number of eligible complaints outstanding, and the top five issues for each participating airline and corresponding percentages.

The Airline Customer Advocate (the Advocate) has been established to facilitate the resolution of complaints from customers of the now four participating airlines in 2021 about the services provided by the airlines. These airlines are Jetstar, Qantas, Rex and Virgin Australia.

The Advocate is an aviation industry funded dispute resolution scheme. This funding model is typical of the many diverse and long-established industry specific resolution schemes across Australia that partner with consumers.

The Advocate provides an informal process to resolve complaints in accordance with an airline's Customer Charter, as well as its Conditions of Carriage and any applicable laws including international conventions that define an airline's liability in prescribed circumstances such as lost baggage. The Australian Consumer Law also protects airline customers.

Australian airline customers took more flights domestically and internationally overall in 2021 as total passenger numbers across all the participating airlines increased to 24,877,400 (up 30%) from 19,044,271 in 2020.

The Advocate received 599 eligible complaints. This represents a decrease of 31% on the previous year 2020 (866) with COVID-19 restrictions, flight delays and cancellations, refund requests, and fees and charges representing the biggest areas for customer dissatisfaction in 2021.

Overall resolution rate increased to approximately 40% in 2021 compared to 29% in 2020, 59% in 2019 and 70% in 2018. 3,520 telephone enquiries were received.

During the reporting period, the average overall complaint finalisation timeframe increased to 28 business days, from 21 days in 2020 and 15.5 days in 2019. The Service Level Agreement for days to finalise is outside the 20-business day target. With the continued impact from COVID-19 on staffing at the Airline Customer Advocate and participating airlines, 45% of customers agreed or strongly agreed their complaint was managed in a timely way.

**Connie Todica**  
February 2022

# Participating Airlines

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## Jetstar

Jetstar Airways is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Qantas Group and commenced operations in May 2004. It states it is a low-cost airline and carried 6,961,686 6,525,308 domestic and international passengers during the reporting period.

## Qantas

Qantas was established in 1920 and is Australia's largest domestic and international airline. It carried 9,974,180 domestic and international passengers during the reporting period.

## Regional Express

Regional Express (also known as Rex) was established in 2002. It states it is Australia's largest independent regional airline it carried 470,511 passengers during the reporting period.

## Virgin Australia

Virgin Australia was established in 2000 and states it is Australia's second largest airline. It carried 7,471,023 domestic and international passengers during the reporting period.

The complaints submitted to the Advocate, contained within this Annual Report, do not necessarily reflect the overall performance of each individual airline.

For information regarding on-time performance and cancellation rates for the 2021 reporting period, visit:

[Airline on Time Performance, 2020-21 Financial Year Report | Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics \(bitre.gov.au\)](https://www.bitre.gov.au/publications/airline-on-time-performance-2020-21-financial-year-report)

# Complaint Process

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A customer needs to submit their complaint to the airline first if they wish to submit a complaint to the Advocate about a service provided. This is because the participating airlines have agreed, as set out in their Customer Charters, to first attempt to resolve a complaint with their customer. The customer should also ask a participating airline to review the decision if a response is received and it is considered inadequate. The participating airlines therefore have two opportunities to try and resolve a customer's concerns before a customer can complain to the Advocate. A customer lodges a complaint to the Advocate electronically via the website at:

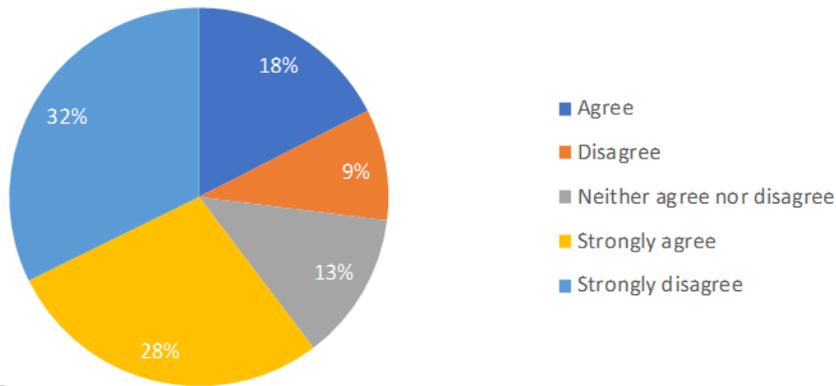
[www.airlinecustomeradvocate.com.au](https://www.airlinecustomeradvocate.com.au)

[www.aviationcomplaints.gov.au/airline-customer-service](https://www.aviationcomplaints.gov.au/airline-customer-service)

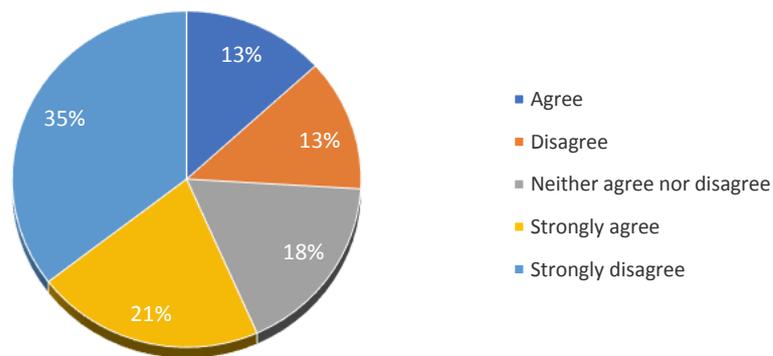
Alternatively, a customer can contact the Advocate to request a Complaint Form be emailed or posted to them, or that their complaint be captured via phone.

# Customer Satisfaction Survey

## My Complaint was Managed in a Timely Way



## Airline Customer Advocate was Independent in all Interactions with Me.



# Eligible Complaints

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A complaint to the Advocate is eligible if:

- (a) The complaint is about a participating airline's services; and
- (b) The customer has already tried to resolve the complaint directly with the participating airline by following the complaints process set out in the airline's Customer Charter and has sought a review of the response received from the participating airline and allowed for the timeframes specified in the participating airline's Customer Charter or as otherwise communicated. Alternatively, the customer has not received a response within those timeframes; and
- (c) The complaint relates to an event or circumstances that occurred less than 12 months ago.

A person may lodge a complaint on behalf of another person who is unable to make the complaint on their own behalf, provided they have that person's authority.

A person cannot use the services of the Advocate in relation to a complaint if a claim has already been filed in a court or tribunal (whether pending or finalised) or a complaint has been lodged with a government authority in relation to the same matter.

## Airline Services

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Customers can submit a complaint concerning services provided by the participating airlines, and may be in relation to:

- Flight delay or cancellation
- Contact centre or reservation services
- Refund request
- Fees or charges
- Specific needs
- Website
- In-flight customer services
- Airport customer services
- Baggage services
- Safety
- Security
- Discrimination
- Loyalty/Frequent Flyer program
- Airport lounge
- Conditions of Carriage

See definitions at <http://www.airlinecustomeradvocate.com.au/General/Eligibility.aspx>

Also see the participating airlines' Customer Charters at:

<http://www.airlinecustomeradvocate.com.au/General/AirlinesCustomerCharter.aspx>

# Complaint Steps

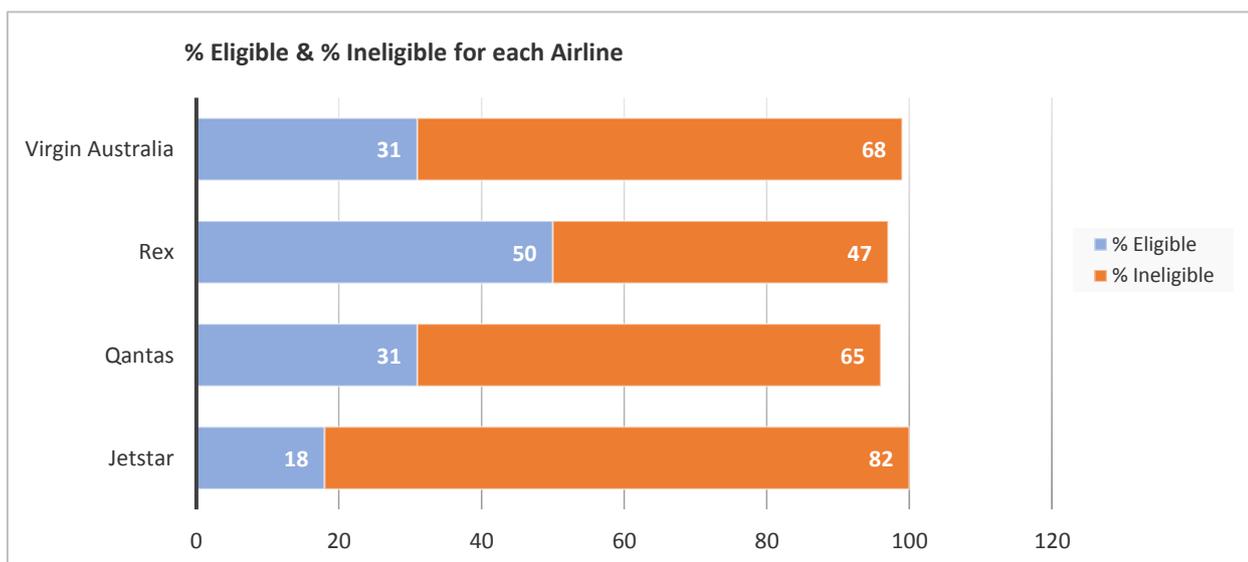
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The Advocate receives the complaint and can ask the customer for additional information to clarify the complaint or outcome sought.

The Advocate then assigns the complaint to a case manager at the applicable participating airline within five working days after receipt. At this step, the airline case manager may contact the customer to clarify any points about the complaint or attempt resolution again directly with the customer.

The participating airline provides a written response to the Advocate within ten working days of receipt. The Advocate can also ask the participating airline for more information within five working days.

The eligible customer should receive a response within 20 working days from the date they lodged the complaint with the Advocate. Eligible customers are informed of alternative avenues for dispute resolution should they be dissatisfied with the outcome of the Airline Customer Advocate process.



## Top Five Complaints by Airline

Below are the top five complaint issues pertaining to each airline.

Airline - rate of complaints per 100,000 passengers carried	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Rex</b>	Flight delay or cancellation 0.83 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.59 per '00000	Refund request 0.48 per '00000	Cancellation request 0.24 per '00000	Baggage services 0.12 per '00000
<b>Qantas</b>	Refund request 1.44 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.46 per '00000	Loyalty/Frequent flyer program 0.33 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.22 per '00000	Baggage services 0.16 per '00000
<b>Virgin Australia</b>	Refund request 1 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.41 per '00000	Baggage services 0.16 per '00000	Terms and Conditions 0.08 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.05 per '00000
<b>Jetstar</b>	Refund request 0.86 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.24 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.16 per '00000	Baggage services 0.13 per '00000	Cancellation request 0.09 per '00000

Note: A zero result refers to zero complaints in that category.

## Top Five Complaints Overall

Below are the top five complaint issues overall.

Top 5 themes by airline, as a rate of complaint per 100,000 passengers carried.	Refund request 47%	Flight delay or cancellation 17%	Fees or charges 7%	Baggage services 6%	Loyalty/Frequent flyer program 6%
<b>Rex</b>	Refund request 0.48 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.83 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.59 per '00000	Baggage services 0.12 per '00000	0
<b>Qantas</b>	Refund request 1.44 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.46 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.22 per '00000	Baggage services 0.16 per '00000	Loyalty/Frequent flyer program 0.33 per '00000
<b>Virgin Australia</b>	Refund request 1 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.41 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.05 per '00000	Baggage services 0.16 per '00000	Loyalty/Frequent flyer program 0.04 per '00000
<b>Jetstar</b>	Refund request 0.86 per '00000	Flight delay or cancellation 0.24 per '00000	Fees or charges 0.16 per '00000	Baggage services 0.13 per '00000	Loyalty/Frequent flyer program 0.03 per '00000

Note: A zero result refers to zero complaints in that category.

# Major Events In 2021

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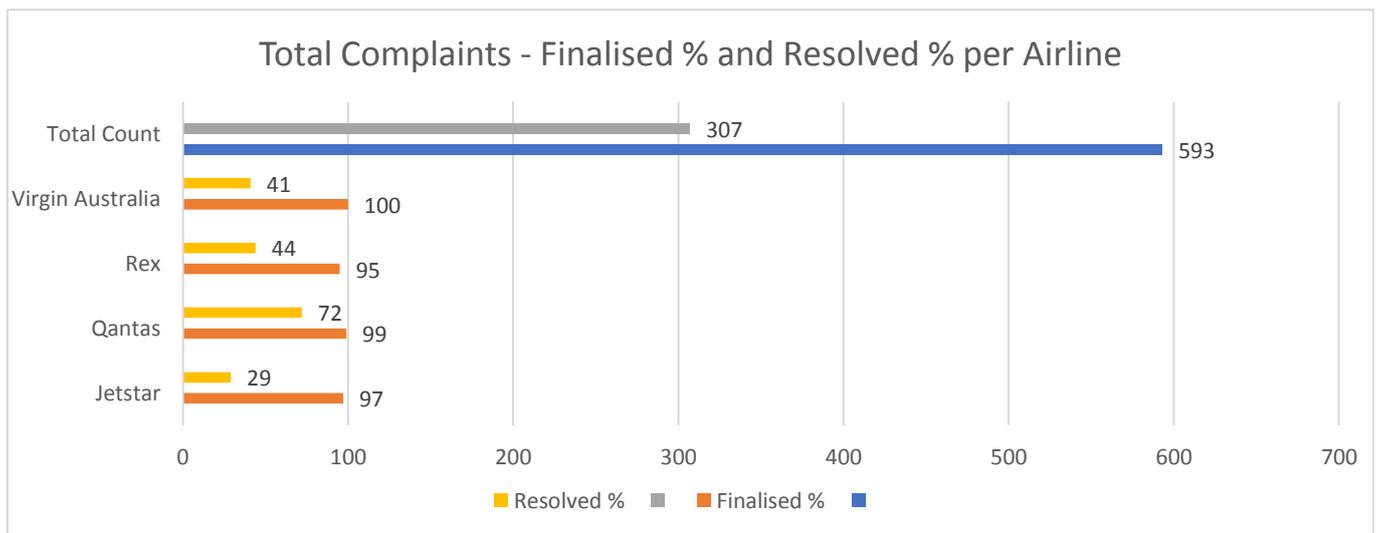
The aviation sector has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 during the entirety of 2021 (and since March 2020). Ongoing border restrictions and snap lockdowns brought on by the Delta and Omicron variants have had a significant impact on airline activity and have caused ongoing disruptions to operations. The subsequent flight cancellations and necessary schedule changes have been significant during this period.

Australian airlines had to slash domestic capacity and suspend routes as Omicron variant of COVID-19 torpedoed demand. During 2021, with the Australia wide lockdowns there was a decline in expected revenue for the entire airline industry. The network had to introduce capacity cuts, in response to the latest coronavirus pandemic wave, scaling back its domestic and international capacity plans. The highly infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 started to spread across Australia in late 2021. To limit the spread of the virus the Australian Government reintroduced nationwide activity restrictions which impacted many industries, including the airline industry. Operating restrictions, due to concerns about becoming infected, were not the only adverse impacts that COVID-19 has had on the airline industry; the loss of staff due to infection or social isolation has also seriously disrupted operations. The Omicron wave hit Australia harder than most other countries.

## Finalised Complaints

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During the reporting period, 593 complaints were finalised (99%).

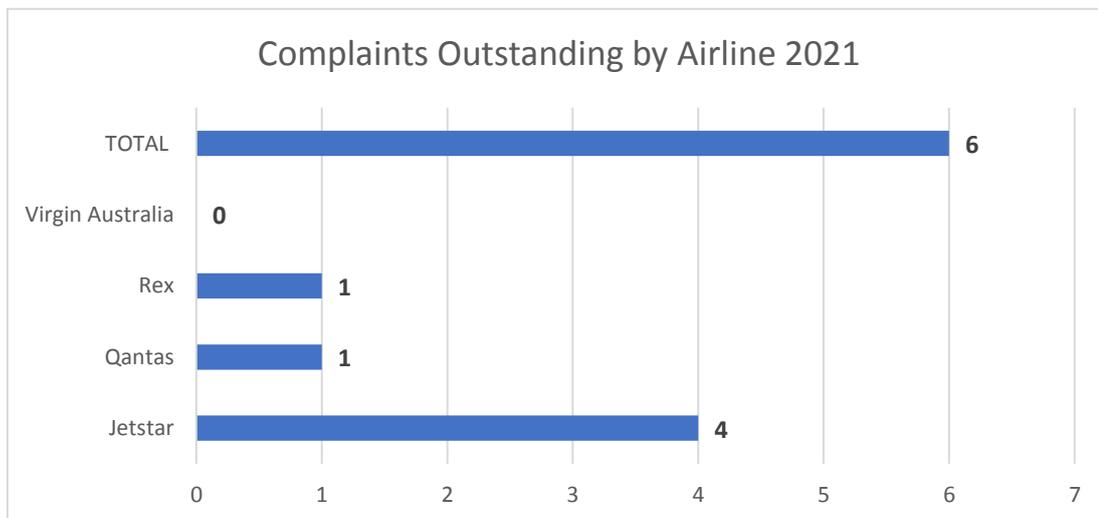


Note: 'Finalised' denotes that the case was actioned and closed.  
'Resolved' denotes that a complaint is resolved to the satisfaction of the customer.

# Complaints Outstanding

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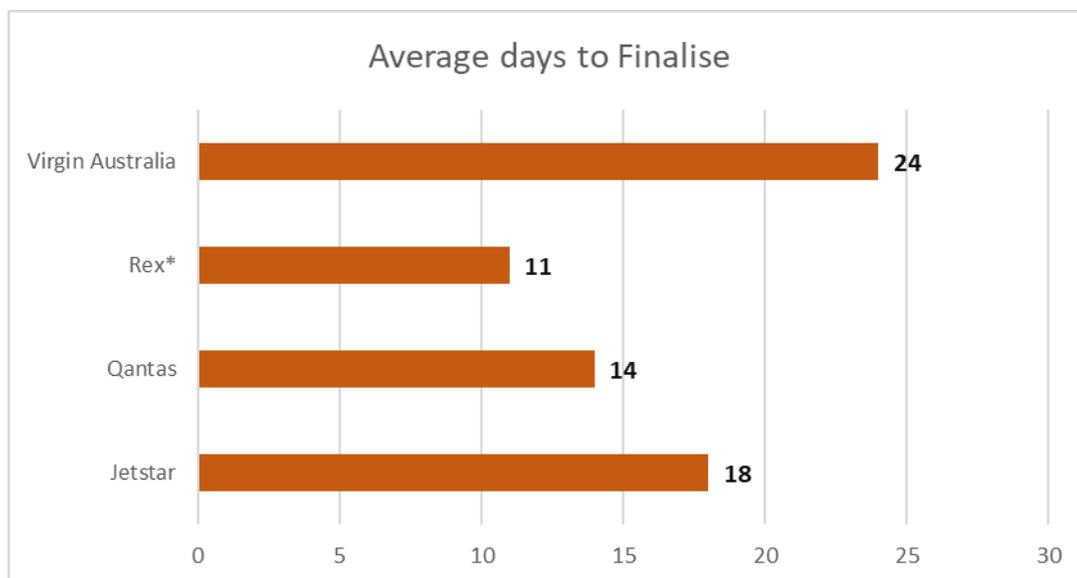
Six complaints were outstanding at the end of the reporting period.



# Time Taken to Finalise Complaints

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The average number of days taken to finalise a complaint was 17 calendar days in 2021. This is under the published 20 working day timeframe specified by the participating airlines. This is a positive reduction in processing time, down from an average of 21 days for last year.

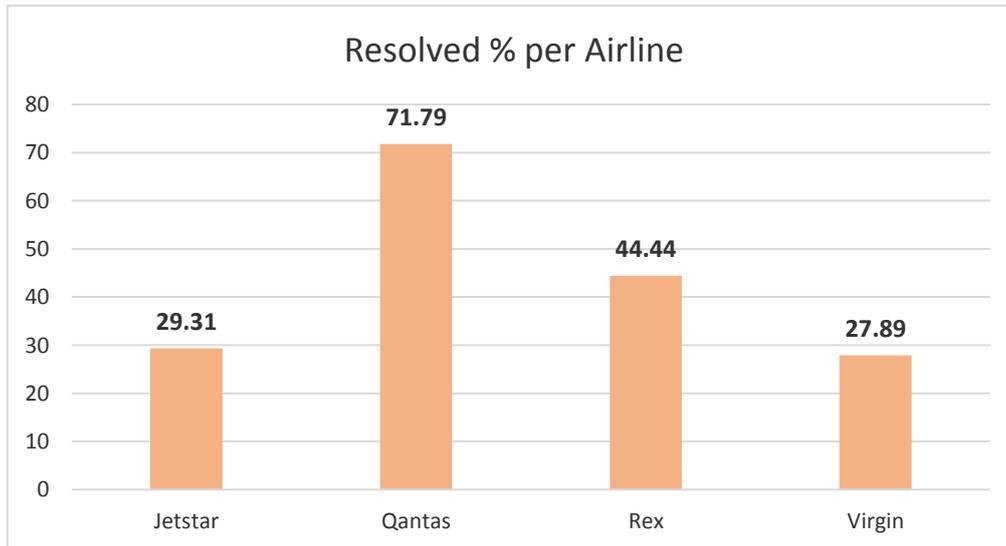


\*Note: Rex day count was inflated due to an anomaly with two cases in error, graph depicts removal of these case.

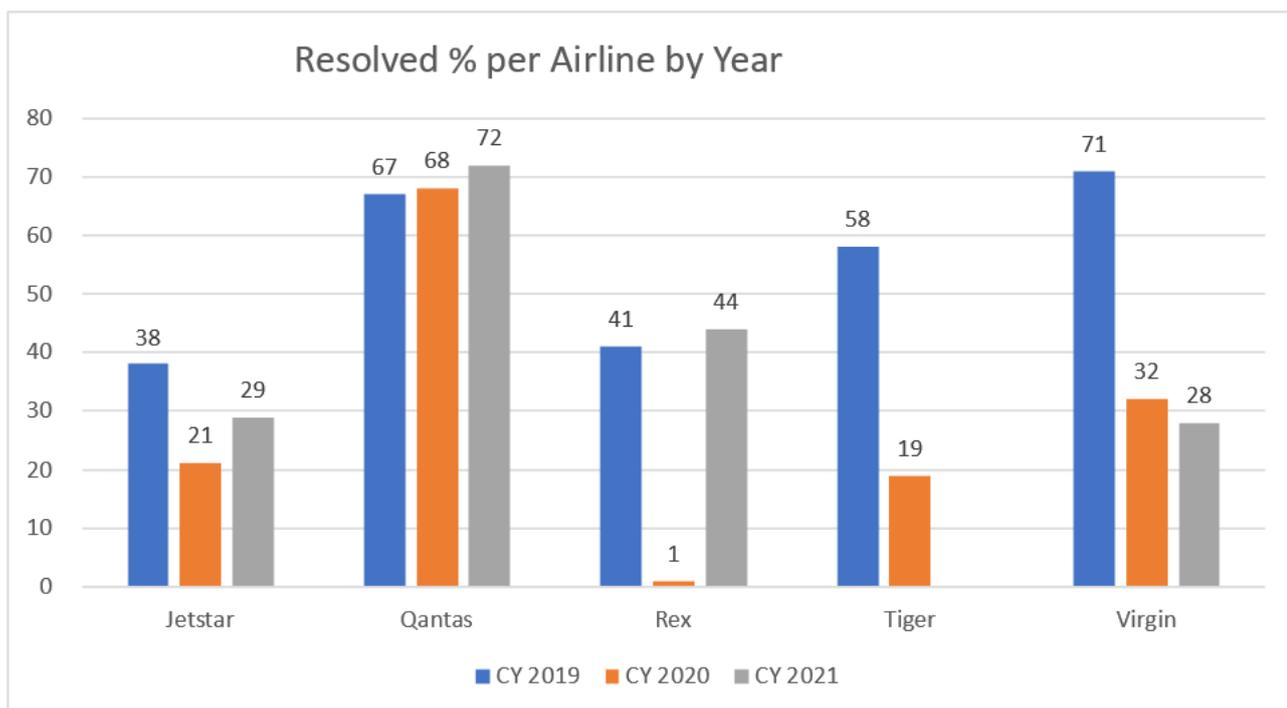
# Resolving Complaints

A complaint is deemed resolved if the customer considers the complaint resolved, if the outcome requested by the customer in the complaint is offered by the airline and accepted by the customer, or if an offer made by an airline is accepted by the customer.

For the 593 complaints finalised in 2021, 307 (52%) were resolved to the customer’s satisfaction. This is a decrease on the previous year (2020) when 803 complaints were finalised and 401 (50%) were resolved.



The table below depicts the change in complaint resolution percentage, for each airline year to year, for past three years. The ongoing impact of COVID-19 meant several Australian Airlines went under administration, and Tiger Airways had to cease operations. Airlines under administration are not able to provide refunds. Refunds to customer equate to resolution, therefore some airlines had a significant drop in resolved rate.



# Telephone Enquiries

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Customers who are thinking about making a complaint can call the Advocate's toll-free enquiry number 1800 813 129. Information is offered about accessing the Advocate's service and its role to facilitate the resolution of complaints.

During the reporting period, the Advocate received a total of 3,520 calls.

Customers are provided information about how to resolve their complaint with an airline directly or assisted with lodging an eligible complaint with the Advocate. Customers can also request a Complaint Form if that is the customer's preferred method of lodging their complaint. Some consumers may be referred to another complaint handling service or regulatory body if their concern is about a non-participating airline or a non-airline service.

# Website

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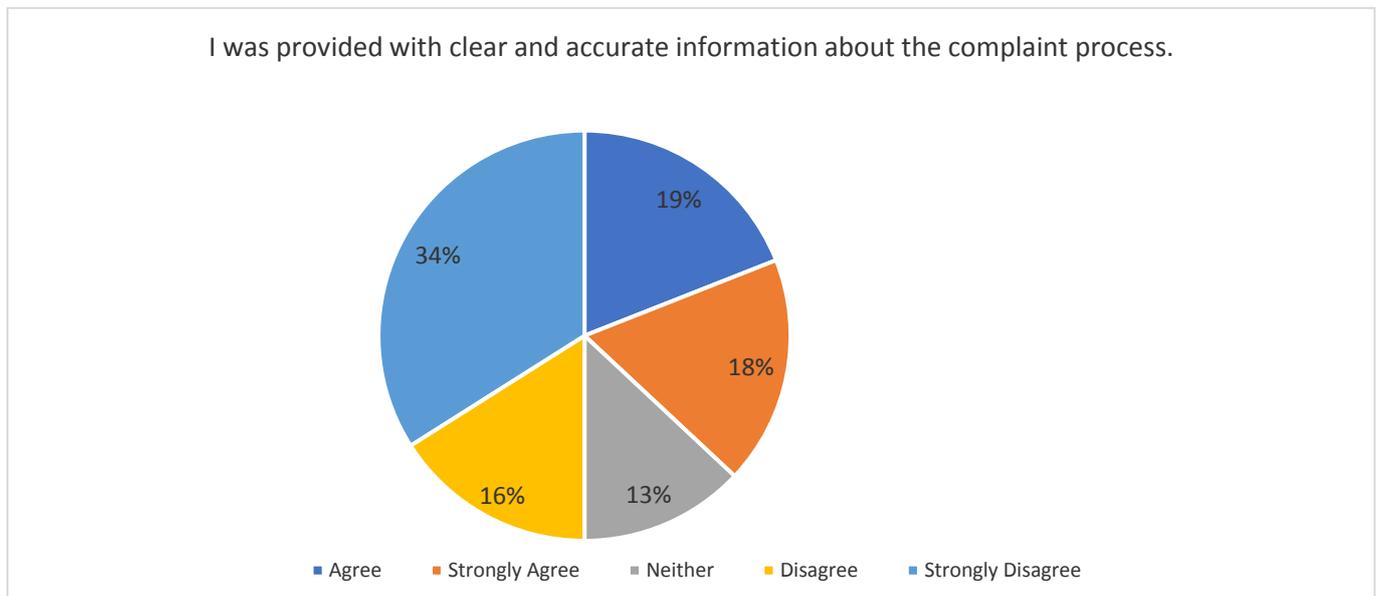
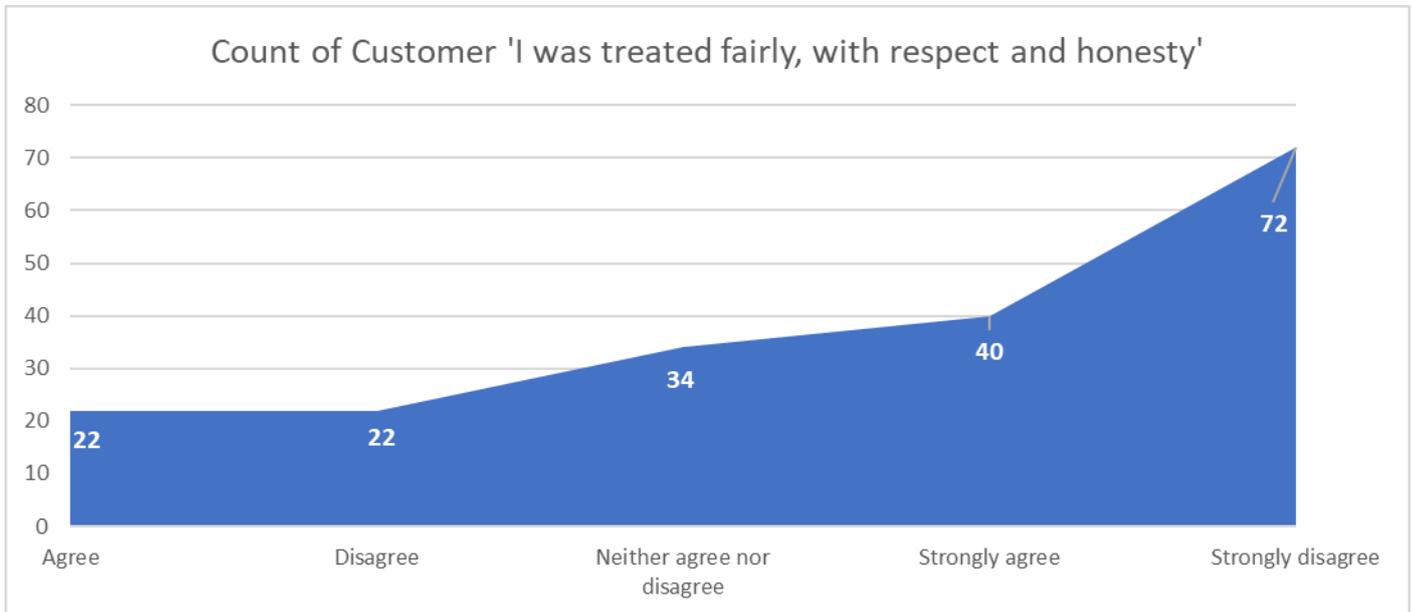
The Airline Customer Advocate website is at [www.airlinecustomeradvocate.com.au](http://www.airlinecustomeradvocate.com.au)

The website contains links to the Customer Charters of the participating airlines and each of their online complaint forms. There is also information about the Advocate including its Mission Statement, Customer Service Charter and Privacy Statement.

The website contains the online form for lodging a complaint electronically. If a customer cannot lodge a complaint online, they can call or write to the Advocate to request a Complaint Form which can be returned and lodged by post or fax. A complaint number is automatically generated and emailed to the email address included on the form. A customer can track the progress of their complaint at any time and if required, also lodge additional documentation

# Customer Satisfaction with the Advocate

Eligible customers (599) are surveyed after a complaint is closed. The survey assists the Advocate to know what it is doing well and where it needs to improve its service. During the reporting period, 190 customers responded to the survey (32% of finalised complainants).



# Customer Feedback about The Advocate

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- *“After totally denying my wife and I request for refund because of health reasons and Covid 19, I have received an approval of the monies owing to be refunded. This was after I explained I have contacted A.C.A with all reports and doctor’s letter.”*
- *“I believe your actions got me replies from the airline on Facebook after a month of trying to get in touch with them. The purpose of this email was more to express my thanks and appreciation for hearing back from you and to let you know that you still had some influence in my experience with airline this week.”*
- *“Thank you, Connie. All was eventually resolved to an acceptable outcome.”*
- *“We have fixed the refund issue with the travel agent. Therefore, we want to close the complaint. We are satisfied with the result.”*
- *“Thank you for your email. Yes, we have heard from airline, and they advise that they processed our refund. Thank you very much for getting the ball rolling with them, much appreciated.”*
- *“Thanks so much for checking in. It was only after I lodged my complaint with you and again with airline that I got my refund email. I've not received the refund yet, but I imagine I will. So, unless the refund doesn't turn up (it is 3 months late) then I'm fine.”*
- *“Thank you for your email and support. I can confirm that I have now received the refund by the airline. I can't believe I had to involve a third party to resolve a simple matter. I am sincerely grateful.”*
- *“Just a quick note to advise that the full refund was received directly into my account... Thank you and your Team so much for your assistance in the satisfactory resolution of this matter.”*
- *“Thanks for your reply. The airline has today emailed to say that they received advice from you a complaint had been lodged and are organizing a full refund.”*