

# Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 16 May 2024

## Proposals to End Library Overdue Fines

Executive/routine  
Wards

Executive  
All

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 It is recommended that Culture and Communities Committee:
  - 1.1.1 Note the update on overdue fines for the late return of library stock;
  - 1.1.2 Note the update on lost items in relation to overdue fines;
  - 1.1.3 Agree to permanently end library overdue fines;
  - 1.1.4 Agree to waive any accumulated overdue fine charges; and
  - 1.1.5 Agree to retain charges for lost and damaged items.

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# Report

## Proposals to End Library Overdue Fines

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 This report responds to a motion agreed by the Council as part of the Revenue Budget 2024/25 on officer proposals to permanently end overdue fines.
- 2.2 This report also responds to the request for policy information on the issue of lost items and overdue fines.

### 3. Background

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- 3.1 On 22 February 2024, the Council approved the following [motion](#) by the Administration:
  - 3.1.1 Libraries are hugely valued by our residents; indeed, they were rated amongst the services which our residents missed most during the pandemic. We're committing to keep all our libraries and maintain their opening hours.
  - 3.1.2 Since the pandemic, no overdue fines have been charged and this has resulted in a deficit in the internal library accounts. We're asking for officer proposals to permanently end overdue fines, at no detriment to the library service.
- 3.2 On 29 February 2024, Culture and Communities Committee requested that a Policy Document should be submitted on the issue of items not being returned to libraries, the asset then being lost and no fine imposed, to the next meeting of the Culture and Communities Committee.

### 4. Main report

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#### Overdue Fines

- 4.1 Before the outbreak of the Covid pandemic in March 2020, the Council, in common with many other library service authorities, charged customers for the late return of items of stock. As a result of the pandemic, Edinburgh Libraries closed and stopped charging for all services in March 2020. Following the reopening of all the city's libraries in May 2022, all other fees and charges (apart from overdue fines) were reintroduced on 1 August 2022.

- 4.2 Overdue fines have been increasingly viewed as being out of step with a modern, accessible, and welcoming service and in recent years, a growing number of local authorities have taken the decision to permanently end fines for customers. In Scotland, 22 services have abolished fines with a further three suspending them until further notice.
- 4.3 Both national and international reports cite several benefits associated with the removal of overdue fines including:
- 4.3.1 **Increased use of the library service** - Overseas evidence has shown that removal of overdue fines results in increased library membership and borrowing, and a no-fines approach is seen to encourage the return of lapsed users to the service.
- 4.3.2 **A more equal access to service** - Evidence suggests fines act as a barrier to access for those who are least able to pay the charges with those who are from lower income households more likely to avoid use of the service which in turn has a wider impact on social disadvantage e.g. digital and social inequality. The removal of fines could help to tackle the poverty agenda and promote inclusivity by improving access to service for those who are most in need but who are most likely to be deterred by the potential of a financial penalty.
- 4.3.3 **Increased returns of long overdue stock** - Reports suggest that people are more likely to return their long overdue books to the library without the threat of an overdue fine, and that the practice of levying overdue fines has the opposite effect to what was intended with customers holding on to books because they cannot afford to pay the costs.
- 4.3.4 **An improved customer service** - Administration of the fines system is resource intensive requiring cash handling and collection. The abolishment of overdue fines would remove the need for library colleagues to collect the income and discuss disputed amounts with customers, moving the focus away from transactional duties to more positive and qualitative customer interactions.

### **Lost items**

- 4.4 The library service, as with all other library services, manage a loss of book stock through missing, non-returned or stolen items. In 2019/20 when overdue fines were charged there were 16,156 items recorded as lost/ missing on the libraries management system (LMS), with the total number declining to 10,965 lost/missing in 2023/24 when no overdue fines were levied.
- 4.5 The category of “lost/ missing” includes items which:
- 4.5.1 Have been reported as being lost by a customer; or
- 4.5.2 Cannot be found on the library shelf (which could be for various reasons e.g. incorrectly shelved; potentially stolen; moving between libraries with the wrong LMS status).

- 4.6 The LMS does not record the number of items which are lost and not returned by customers as a separate and distinct figure from the overall total number of lost/missing items. However, a record of income received from customers who paid item replacement costs for lost/damaged items is available and shows a 70% decrease from 2019/20 to 2023/24 figures.
- 4.7 In addition to lost/missing items, there are items that have a long overdue status on the LMS which means that the item is more than four to six weeks overdue. These items remain on the customer's record, and customers are sent electronic automatic reminders to request the return of the item.
- 4.8 If the item is not returned or is reported as being lost/missing by the customer, a replacement cost is currently charged (this was also charged pre-Covid), based on the value of the specific item which has been lost. Pre-Covid, an overdue fine may also have been charged alongside the replacement cost, but this would have been dependant on the individual circumstances and assessment undertaken by the local Lifelong Learning Development Leader.

### **Overdue fines proposals**

- 4.9 Library members who have incurred overdue fines due to the late or non-return of stock pre-Covid will have accumulated historical charges on their borrower records. It is proposed that these charges are removed (see 6.4 for the total accumulated figure for outstanding unpaid fines) and that the service capitalises on the decision to abolish fines by running a high-profile communications campaign to encourage lapsed users to return to the library and new customers to join.
- 4.10 It is proposed that customers would still be liable for the replacement cost of any lost and damaged items to cover replacement costs.
- 4.11 It is also proposed that the service continue to issue automatic electronic reminders to customers for due and overdue items to act as a prompt for the timely return of items.

## **5. Next Steps**

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- 5.1 If Committee agree the recommendation to end library overdue fines, a Communications Plan will be developed to communicate the decision to as many people as possible to encourage lapsed users to return to the library and new customers to join. All current communications on charges and service will be reviewed and updated in line with new policy e.g. charges posters; website information; electronic reminder emails.

## **6. Financial impact**

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- 6.1 If imposed, overdue fine charges are currently 30p per day rising to 35p per day after seven days for adults. This should apply to all items on loan including CD's and DVD's. The service has not historically charged children or young people.

- 6.2 The budgeted income target for overdue fines is £185,000. This is a historical figure which has resulted in unmet budget pressures for the library service for several years. In 2019, the service took a total of £50,000 income from overdue fines leaving an unmet budget pressure of £135,000.
- 6.3 The Council Budget Motion for 2023/24 approved an allocation of £71,000 for a library fine amnesty, reducing the target to £114,000. The budget shortfall for 2024/25 is anticipated to be £114,000.
- 6.4 The total outstanding overdue fines on the LMS from 2002 to date is £49,390.
- 6.5 Throughout 2023/24, the Libraries Service has forecast a budget overspend of £0.8m. This forecast includes the library overdue fines shortfall of £0.114m. If the recommendation to end overdue fines is agreed, the budget pressure of £0.114m will be met from the wider Place directorate revenue budget.

## **7. Equality and Poverty Impact**

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- 7.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken for the proposed change in policy. This found positive impacts relating to equality, health, wellbeing and human rights and the End Poverty Edinburgh Plan. Removing barriers to borrowing and returning books would: increase the socio-economic benefits for residents particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or who have financial barriers to accessing services; will promote inclusivity; and would ensure that those most in need of library services are not deterred or disadvantaged in any way.

## **8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications**

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- 8.1 There are no positive or negative environmental impacts resulting at this stage if the recommendations are agreed.

## **9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact**

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- 9.1 The removal of library overdue fines could result in the non-return of library items, reducing available stock and affecting supply times for reserved items. This would be mitigated by continuing to issue automatic electronic reminders to customers for due and overdue items to act as a prompt for the timely return of items, and by maintaining the replacement cost charge for items that are lost, missing or long overdue.
- 9.2 The recommendation to remove overdue fines is in line with the Council's priorities to create good places to live and work in Edinburgh, and to take all the actions needed to end poverty in Edinburgh.

## **10. Background reading/external references**

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- 10.1 There are no background papers or external references associated with this report.

## 11. Appendices

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