

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

PORTFOLIO HOLDER DELEGATED DECISION

by

COUNTY COUNCILLOR DAVID SELBY

PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR A MORE PROSPEROUS POWYS

Date 24 August 2022

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REPORT TITLE: Fine Free Library Service

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To remove barriers to public use of libraries through removal of fines for overdue books.
- 1.2 Loans to children are already fine free, so the proposed change will remove fines for adult books.
- 1.3 The library service suspended all fines in March 2022 as part of its Covid-19 response, and the service seeks approval to remove fines permanently.

2 Background

- 2.1 Traditionally fines were applied as a contribution to the costs of sending printed overdue reminders to customers. However, the Library Service no longer sends printed overdues because of the costs were prohibitive. Instead, customers can sign up for email or SMS overdue notices. These are sent automatically from the Library Management System (LMS) without any cost to the service.
- 2.2 Customers receive email alerts 3 days before items are due back, and regularly thereafter. They can renew online via the library catalogue or using the library app on a smartphone or tablet. Books can be renewed up to 6 times, at no charge. The practical effect is that people are fined for not renewing, rather than not returning loans.
- 2.3 The library service suspended fines at the start of the first lockdown, and this is ongoing. We also removed any unpaid fines incurred before this date - this allowed us to send a strong message to customers that there would not be *any* fines to pay for overdue items.
- 2.4 This has been well received by customers although library use has still not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Removing fines permanently will help us rebuild the audience and encourage lapsed users to return to the library post pandemic.

2.5 We continue to charge for the replacement cost of books which are not returned within 6 months, and any unpaid bills for books remain on the system until the item is returned, or the bill is paid by the customer.

3. Advice

3.1 Evidence shows that fines act as a barrier to returning items – experience in Libraries who have removed fines demonstrates that customers are more likely to return overdue books when the threat of financial penalty is removed, resulting in better performing stock, and better customer retention.

3.2 Removing fines directly impacts on equality, since fines are more likely to fall on those who are less digitally connected – those with easy online access are more likely to get reminders and will find it easier to renew their loans and avoid fines.

3.3 Fines are also a significant barrier to library use for the poorer/more vulnerable in our society, with the loss of opportunities for learning, literacy, wellbeing and social interaction.

3.4 Introducing Fine Free loans will bring the physical offer in line with the digital offer – there are no fines on eBook and eAudiobooks loans, which results in a more favourable service to those with better digital access.

3.5 Fine-Free loans improve customer service and customer engagement – all other things being equal, those who use libraries the most are more likely to pay the most fines. Fines risk alienating people who simply forget to return or renew loans in time, and one bad experience can put a customer off returning to the library.

3.6 Removing fines improves efficiency. Most Powys libraires have Self Service kiosks, but customers are unable to self-serve if they have outstanding fines. Removing fines will therefore help free up staff time to support customers in other ways.

3.7 Increasingly customers expect to pay by contactless card, as less people carry cash – the cost of equipping libraries in Powys to do this is impractical and not cost effective for small payments.

3.8 Fine Free loans also makes library systems easier and more practical for volunteers to manage, particularly around using the Library Management System.

3.9 There is a global trend to remove fines on overdue items. In Wales, 5 library authorities are already Fine Free, with a further 5 authorities actively seeking to adopt the policy.

3.10 In a March 2022 survey of libraries in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Libraries Connected found that around 25% of libraries were already Fine Free, and another 33% were considering it.

- 3.11 Of those Libraires that had already removed library fines, 40% reported an increase in Adults using the library as a result, and 30% reported an increase in families and people from disadvantaged areas. Others were unsure as the restrictions brought about by Covid-19 had made it difficult to measure the impact.
- 3.12 In a 2022 survey of Welsh public libraries, those who had removed fines reported an increase in the numbers of overdue books returned once customers were no longer worried about fines. All reported a positive response from customers, and felt strongly that Fine Free loans removed a significant barrier to customer services.
- 3.13 Removing financial penalties on overdue items improves services to customers; supports more equal access; and will help re-engage customers post pandemic.
- 3.14 People will continue to get reminders about items which are due back, and will be charged for the replacement costs of any items not returned after 6 months – although this will be cleared automatically if the item is returned.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1 The income from library fines in 2019/20 was £5,889, against a nil budget. Income from fines has been reducing year on year as more people renew online to avoid financial penalties for late return.
- 4.2 The loss of income will be met through a minor reduction in the Library Service stock budget, and in particular the removal of budget for national newspapers. At the beginning of the pandemic all hardcopy newspapers were withdrawn from libraries for hygiene health and safety reasons, and following withdrawal of Covid-19 restrictions national newspapers have not been reinstated. Local newspapers will continue to be made available in libraries where appropriate.
- 4.3 Assuming an average of 1 hour per week across all libraries, the staffing cost of collecting fines would be around £13,000 (based on Grade 6 scale point 14 branch librarian post).
- 4.4 Without fines, more people can use library self service machines, meaning staff are freed up to support customers in other ways.
- 4.5 Fine free services are also easier for volunteers to manage, meaning that volunteers in staffed libraries do not need to call on staff to help.
- 4.6 The Deputy Head of Finance acknowledges the report and the services proposal to deliver reductions to mitigate the impact of the proposed changes

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 Legal: the recommendations can be accepted from a legal point of view.

5.2 The Head of Legal and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) has commented as follows: “ I note the legal comment and have nothing to add to the report”.

6. Impact Assessment

6.1 An impact Assessment is not required.

7. Recommendation

7. 1 To remove the application of fines for overdue books with immediate effect so as to become a Fine Free Library Service.

7.2 To continue to charge for the replacement cost of books which are not returned within 6 months.

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