

Title of meeting: Culture and City Development Decision Meeting

Date of meeting: 31 January 2020

Subject: Library Free fines and Overdues

Report by: Director of Culture, Leisure and Regulatory Services

Wards affected: All

Key decision: No

Full Council decision: No

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To update the Portfolio Holder on the impact of the abolition of reservation fees and overdue fines in the Library and Archive Service and make recommendations for the remaining period of the pilot based on evaluation findings.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To continue to offer free reservations of books to library members for the duration of the three year pilot period to March 2021.**
- 2.2 To continue not to charge overdue fines to library members for the duration of the three year pilot period to March 2021.**
- 2.3 To carry out a second evaluation of the pilot in autumn 2020 to make recommendations beyond the pilot period.**

3. Background

- 3.1 The decision was taken at the Culture, Leisure and Sport Portfolio of 16 March 2018 that for a pilot period of three years, Portsmouth Library Services would cease to charge fines for the late return of books and other library materials lent to the public from Portsmouth owned stock. Stock from other library authorities would continue to be charged according to inter-library-lending requirements.
- 3.2 It was also decided that for a pilot period of three years, Portsmouth Library Services would cease to charge a reservation fee for books and other library materials where the request can be satisfied within existing Portsmouth library lending stock. Stock obtained from other library sources and agreed with the requester would continue to be charged at cost.

3.3 An evaluation of the two pilots was to be conducted throughout the three year period in terms of library membership, use of services and loan return rates taking recommendations for further action to the Portfolio Holder in year three. On Monday 18th June the recommendations were put into effect and Portsmouth Library members no longer paid overdue fines or reservation charges.

3.4 This report analyses the impact these two changes have had on the Service and makes recommendations to continue with the pilot project in order to continue to monitor these areas.

4. Reasons for recommendations

4.1 Free reservations:

4.1.1 The whole city collection of books, talking books, language packs and CDs and DVDs are now accessible to all residents regardless of where they live in the city because they can reserve items from other libraries for free. Previously residents living in an area with a smaller library stock were penalised because they had to pay a £1 charge to arrange to borrow items from other Portsmouth City Council Libraries.

4.1.2 The increase in the number of reservations being made since the change has been significant - a 54% rise in reservations and 18% rise in requests for not in stock items. The Service has also seen an increase in suggestions made for new stock. This is particularly good news because it means the Service's stock selection becomes more directly responsive to the needs of local readers.

4.1.3 The increase in books and other items moving around the city has put extra pressure on the daily van delivery to branch libraries which means the delivery takes longer and has increased the workload of the Attendants who drive the van. This is being managed and continues to be monitored.

4.1.4 There was initially a concern that customers would reserve lots of books and not collect them; however this has only happened in a tiny number of cases and is not a significant issue.

4.1.5 The increase in reservations has placed extra pressure on the Library Bookfund. There are longer waiting lists for books by popular authors. The Lee Child novel *Past Tense* had a waiting list of 28 people for the original eight copies in November 2018 which is well above average numbers and this demand has continued for similar bestselling authors' books. The Information and Stock team regularly monitor waiting lists and purchase more copies of a title where necessary meaning that the Service is buying more popular fiction. In the case of the Lee Child book the Service acquired another six copies to meet demand.

There is less pressure on the non-fiction fund however. As customers are able to reserve books for free on more obscure topics that are held at larger libraries this means not every library has to hold a copy of a book on a particular subject. The Service's online information service is also available free to library members.

Purchasing less non-fiction for the Service helps meet rising costs of purchasing more fiction from bestselling authors.

4.1.6 Free Reservations have improved DVD issues at most of the smaller libraries that do not have their own collections- not consistently and from a very small base but for example Carnegie Library only issues one DVD in the 12 months before free reservations were introduced but has issued eleven DVDs since then.

4.1.7 Feedback on free reservations from customers in libraries has been very positive.

a) The following anecdotal feedback came from Cosham and Carnegie Libraries:

a reader commented on how thrilled she was with the service we provide, as well as mentioning how welcome it was that we no longer charge reservation fees.

A user commented about our free reservation service. She said it was absolutely 'Marvellous!' and she was pleased that both herself and her husband can ask for any books they like and have them sent across in no time.

"Quite a few elderly people have said to me that they are really pleased that the free reservations have come into place as they find it difficult travelling further than the local library. One lady in particular was a frequent visitor but struggled to travel further than Beddow due to her age and ability, and the free reservations meant that she was able to get a lot more books in and so she used to order in a lot more books. It was particularly useful as she didn't always know if she would enjoy a book, so she was able to try something new"

b) The following feedback was received via email:

The lack of fines and, in particular, free reservations, along with the ability to reserve online and then collect from Beddow library, within walking distance of our house, has kept both my husband and myself with a constant supply of reading matter.

Many of the books we have reserved are non-fiction, kept in the Store, and we have been very grateful to the staff for finding them for us and sending them quite promptly. It is an excellent service.

Frankly, if we had to pay for reservations, we would not be able to make as much use of the library as we now do.

4.1.8 The increase in reservations also demonstrates that more library users are making greater use of the City collections such as the Central Library store.

4.2 Removal of overdue fines on books and talking books:

- 4.2.1 At the March 2018 Portfolio meeting, the following reasons were outlined for providing a strong case to remove overdue fines for the late return of library books.
- 4.2.2 Library fines were and remain a barrier to library access, particularly amongst economically marginalised user groups who stand to benefit the most from library services. The term "fine" infers a sense of 'wrong doing', that can be prohibitive to many users, as the threat of a financial penalty causes many people to act in the opposite way than the fine intends, i.e. many retain the books because they are too scared of the fine to return them. As a result, fines accrue and eventually borrowing rights are suspended; users let their membership lapse and drift away from the service altogether. This is of broader concern as library membership is often linked to other services, such as using computers, accessing the internet, and taking part in courses and events. Moreover, the people who cannot afford to pay fines — including those on low incomes, the elderly and the socially disadvantaged — benefit the most from using libraries, not only to access books, but as community hubs, social meeting places, and to access other services.
- 4.2.3 There is no clear evidence base to demonstrate whether income generated from fines produces a surplus over the cost of labour and materials involved in collecting them. More broadly, over time, library professionals have become increasingly concerned about the impact of fines as a financial penalty. This resulted in a pioneering pilot scheme delivered by the City of Sydney Public Libraries, in Australia, which like Portsmouth operates 9 libraries across the city. The service abolished all library fines after an eight-month trial showed that fines do not work as an incentive for people to return books.
- 4.2.4 Portsmouth Libraries have also offered an eAudiobook and eBook service since 2015 and those items did not have overdue fines so the fines system was penalising those who chose to borrow items in traditional format. The new system makes this even and fairer and much simpler to understand.
- 4.2.5 Portsmouth Libraries have not charged overdue fines on books borrowed on a child's ticket for many years so again abolishing fines for adults simplifies the system and promotes a positive image of libraries.
- 4.2.6 The Information and Stock Team has been monitoring the number of issues during the first year of the pilot project. So far there has not been an increase in issues for the Service. However it is important to note that it is going to take time for the perception of libraries and overdue fines to change. A second publicity campaign will be launched in the New Year to further highlight the abolition of fines. It's also important to note that book issues may have declined further were it not for the removal of fines, however it is difficult to speculate at this stage and the Information and Stock team will continue to monitor issues for the duration of the pilot and report again in autumn 2020.
- 4.2.7 The Information and Stock Team has also looked at the rates of return of overdue books to determine whether the abolition of fines has led to more books being returned. A concern has always been that overdue fines deter people from returning items and using the Service again. Likewise the removal of fines may encourage

people to keep overdue items longer as there is less to motivate them to return their items. To motivate the public to return items, readers with overdue items cannot borrow more books until they have renewed or returned their loans.

More books have been returned in the period of the pilot - an increase of 12% which suggests that the pilot is having a positive effect.

- 4.2.8 Has the abolition of fines increased library membership numbers? In the period April 2018 - March 2019 there was actually a slight decrease in active members - however this could be due to the fact that the Library Service no longer automatically provides library cards to school pupils and has also put in place processes for more efficient ways of handling peoples' data if they are no longer using the service. The Service will continue to monitor both rates of return and membership numbers and report again in autumn 2020.
- 4.2.9 Initial feedback from the public on social media in response to publicity about the removal of fines was very positive with one of the most popular responses for a Facebook post on Library and Archive Service social media. Three letters were sent to the Portsmouth News after the first announcement of the abolition of overdue fines. All three were against the proposal on the basis that it would encourage theft of books and the late return of items. This has been addressed by requiring customers to renew or return their overdue items before they can use their library card again. Borrowers will also shortly be sent emails that remind them when an item's due date is approaching and also that will notify of overdue items and replacement charges for lost items.

It's important to note that lost and damaged items are still charged for so library users cannot take out an unlimited number of items and not return them indefinitely without being penalised.

- a) The following anecdotal feedback has been received from Cosham Library:

On Thursday, a young girl told me her boyfriend had lots of fines on his card, and so he was too scared to come in and use the library again. I explained he had nothing to be scared about anyway, and also mentioned the no fines policy in place at the moment.

- b) The following staff feedback came from Central Library:

I have had younger people, particularly one young mum at Central who, because of no fines, she brought back lost books from her own and children's accounts and she was able to clear her account and start borrowing books again for herself and her family, in turn taking part in the Summer Reading Challenge etc.

- 4.3 As this pilot project is still in its infancy it is recommended that a second evaluation of the effects of the removal of reservation fees and overdue fines is carried out and reported in the autumn of 2020. This will provide a much longer

period of time to properly assess the impact and make recommendations for whether to continue beyond the pilot period.

5. Integrated Equality impact assessment

5.1 An IIA is attached (Appendix 2)

6. Legal implications

6.1 The Council has a specific statutory power under Section 145 of the Local Government Act 1972 to make contributions (which would include grant funding) towards the pursuit of arts, entertainment and cultural objectives and may also rely on the general power of competence for local authorities in the Localism Act 2011, section 1.

7. Director of Finance's comments

7.1 Total Income previously generated from library fines and reservation fees was £20,000 per year (fines - £16,000, reservation fees £4,000). This has been funded from other library service budgets as per the report of the 16 March 2018.

7.2 The costs associated with the recommendations in this report can continue to be met from existing budget resources.

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Signed by:
Stephen Baily
Director of Culture, Leisure and Regulatory Services

Appendices:

- 1. Reservations and requests statistics 2016-2019
- 2. Integrated Impact Assessment

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by on

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Signed by:
Cabinet Member for Culture and City Development