
Service and Operational Matters - 22 October 2019

ITEM 8.3 Abolishment of Library Overdue Fees

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PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Canterbury-Bankstown City Library Service recently conducted a trial abolishment of overdue fees to assess the impact this would have on the borrowing patterns of library items.

ISSUE

This report provides a summary of the impacts of the trial abolishment of overdue fees conducted from 2 October 2018 to 30 June 2019 in Council's Library Services.

RECOMMENDATION That -

1. Council exhibit the amendment to the fees and charges regarding the abolishment of library overdue fees in accordance with the Local Government Act 1993.
2. The matter be reported back to Council at the end of the exhibition period.

ATTACHMENTS

Nil

POLICY IMPACT

If the recommendation is supported amendments will need to be made to the Library Services Policy.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There will be no major financial impact as these fees are not brought to account and as stated in the report there were only \$8,000 collected in 2017/18. There will also be the benefit of the return of overdue items to the Library Collection. During the trial period this resulted in the return of 1,760 outstanding items.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Community will benefit from the waiving of fines and from the return of books to the collection as the trial has shown.

DETAILED INFORMATION

Canterbury-Bankstown City Library Service recently conducted a trial abolishment of overdue fees to assess the impact it would have on the borrowing patterns of library items. Overdue fees, common place for more than 20 years in many public libraries, were introduced in an attempt to encourage library members to return items in a timely manner. In recent years, however, public libraries have been abolishing overdue fees, arguing that charging overdue fees undermines the mission of libraries to provide free and equitable access to information so that all members of the community may educate themselves.

Many public libraries offer

- free membership,
- free attendance at programs and events,
- free borrowing of physical and online resources and
- free access to public computers.

Overdue fees are today regarded as being a barrier to access, especially for low-income families and members who are ashamed or financially unable to pay, and this results in members discontinuing their library use entirely.

Unfortunately, while families are encouraged to avail themselves of library resources that are freely available, the threat of accumulating overdue fees, discourages those in the community who could most benefit from accessing library services and borrowing items.

There can be valid reasons for members not returning items on time, such as

- lack of transport,
- illness or
- having to care for others

In addition, the abolishment of overdue fees would have little impact on Council's income. In 2017/18, only \$8,000 was collected in overdue fees from members and the cost in staff time to collect fees often exceeds the income collected.

At May 2018, there were 37,000 individual overdue fees on library memberships. Of these, 9% were for adult members, 15% for junior members and 19% for youth members. This highlights the fact that borrowing privileges for junior and youth are more affected by overdue fees than for other users. Parents often feel they can't come into the library, while the fees remain unpaid and their children are prevented from borrowing. Furthermore, when these children become adults, it becomes difficult to convince them that the library is a welcoming and supportive place.

The trial to abolish overdue fees has led to a 30% reduction in overdue items. At May 2018, 5,760 items with a significant replacement value were overdue. However, at June 2019 after the trial less than 4,000 items were overdue. This tends indicate that members were no longer fearful to return overdue items when overdue fees were not accrued. There has also been a reduction in the amount of time Staff members have had to spend in awkward exchanges with library members about overdue fees.

During the overdue fee trial period the circulation of physical items increased, particularly in the children's collections. Compared to the same period the previous year, junior fiction loans increased by 51% from 73,658 to 111,397 items; junior graphic novel loans increased 181% from 5,129 to 14,412 items; junior non-fiction loans increased 54% from 27,397 to 42,145 items; junior magazines increased 148% from 1,001 to 2,377 items and loans of literacy materials also increased 92% from 3,661 to 7,019 items. A total of 1,000,200 physical items were borrowed from Canterbury-Bankstown libraries in 2018/19 and only 3% remain overdue at June 2019.

While it is challenging to study the effect of overdue fees on circulation patterns, it appears that the policy of charging overdue fees has not been effective in getting books returned to the Library any faster, it is costly to enforce, and it alienates community members, especially those who may need access to the library due to economic hardships.

The trial showed that without the threat of an overdue fee members were no longer embarrassed or afraid to return items; the majority of borrowed items were returned, often close to their due date; circulation increased, particularly children's resources; and staff members were able to redeploy their time to promote library services and resources to members.

Public libraries are increasingly becoming community hubs and the community should be encouraged, not deterred, from using their local library. The abolishment of overdue fees will encourage library members to return items, making financial sense in terms of return on investment, and will ultimately provide an incentive for community members to re-establish a connection with their library service.