

# Auckland Libraries' journey to fines free

Louise LaHatte & Eliza Richards

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**600+**  
libraries  
fines free in  
world

**100%**  
public libraries  
in Ireland fines  
free 😊

**31%**  
19 public  
libraries  
completely  
fines free in  
Aotearoa

**79%**  
50 public  
libraries with no  
fines for  
children in  
Aotearoa



# Why go fines free?



**To ensure everyone has fair and equitable access to information, reading, learning and connections to their communities.**

- Libraries aren't just about borrowing – but fines and the shame of not being able to afford to pay them stops people coming to us to benefit from everything else we have to offer - access to learning, skills development, stories to enrich their lives and connect them with others, a sense of belonging and place, opportunities to thrive.
- Removing fines increases use and membership of libraries.
- Fines are punitive, affecting mostly those who cannot afford to pay and preventing their use of libraries.
- Library overdue items were in place as a mechanism to encourage the return of borrowed items, but do not actually achieve this. They should never have been treated as a revenue stream – because if every one did return their books on time there would be no revenue!



# Building the case / busting the myths

## MYTH #1: FINES ARE A KEY SOURCE OF LIBRARY REVENUE

- Fact: Studies show that fines account for less than 1% of library budgets, and cost far more administrative effort to collect.
- Given the increasing prevalence of digital materials, fines continue to be a declining source of revenue.

## MYTH #2: FINES ARE AN EFFECTIVE INCENTIVE TO RETURN LIBRARY MATERIALS ON TIME

- Fact: Multiple studies show that there is no empirical evidence that charging late fines is a successful way to have people return items on time.
- In fact, libraries who have eliminated fines report the opposite



# Building the case / busting the myths

## MYTH #3: LIBRARY FINES ARE A MINOR COST TO LIBRARY USERS

- Fact: Library fines exclude and marginalize vulnerable communities.
- Library fines are a significant expense to those with low or no income and cause people to stop using the library.

## MYTH #4: LIBRARY FINES TEACH RESPONSIBILITY

- Fact: Eliminating fines does not eliminate consequences or personal responsibility.
- The library's mission is to ensure equitable access to information for all.
- Overdue fines don't teach responsibility: they distinguish between people who can afford to pay and those who cannot.



# Getting approval to go fines free

*It helped that Auckland Council was committed to help Aucklanders with recovery from the pandemic impacts, and to particularly support “those who need us most”*

Auckland Libraries started with a literature review and research about what other libraries had done. Then we held workshops with library staff and our Council financial advisors to come up with different options and approaches.

This was then developed as a business case asking for the removal of fines to be included in the Council Long-Term Plan. We workshopped the proposal and options with the Council committee we report to, and worked with the financial planners to have it included in consultation for the Long Term Plan.

The majority of respondents commenting on this issue were in support, and following another workshop with them, Councillors supported the officers recommendation to remove fines as part of approving the Long Term Plan.

The change was part of the overall Council 10 year budget, so Libraries were not required to make up the lost revenue.

We set up an implementation team to work out the technical processes, what measures we would use to monitor the impact, and plan a campaign to inform people and encourage them back.



## Other libraries' experience

### More borrowing – Salt Lake City

– issues increased 16% over the previous year after removal of overdue fines and an 11% increase in checkouts and borrowers in the year after going fine free

### Communities who need us most

The San Diego Public Library forgave library fines from 2018. Instead of using financially punitive measures, such as overdue fees, to enforce due dates, the library adopted a materials recovery lending policy that blocks patrons with overdue materials from further borrowing until the overdue materials are returned. The changes were enacted after a city study revealed that nearly half of the library's patrons whose accounts were blocked as a result of late fees lived in two of the city's poorest neighborhoods. "

### Vulnerable people

"For many people battling mental health issues the library is one place in the community they feel able to go to. Library fines are sometimes accrued by people unable to face life and the fine becomes a barrier to ongoing use of the library."

### More members - Tasmania

After all libraries scrapped overdue fees in Nov 2018, more than 8,000 new members signed up in just five months in contrast to the loss of 900 members encountered in the same period the year prior.



# What changes we made

- We stopped applying any more overdue fines from 1 September 2021
- We removed all debt from patron records relating to overdue fines
- We retained charges for Lost and Damaged items
- We retained debt owing for Lost and Damaged items
- We removed the admin fee for Lost books
- We stopped using debt agencies to collect debt over \$50
- We removed replacement membership card charges
- We removed a non-pick up of holds charge
- We planned an amnesty for people to pay what they could for their Lost book debt... BUT COVID!





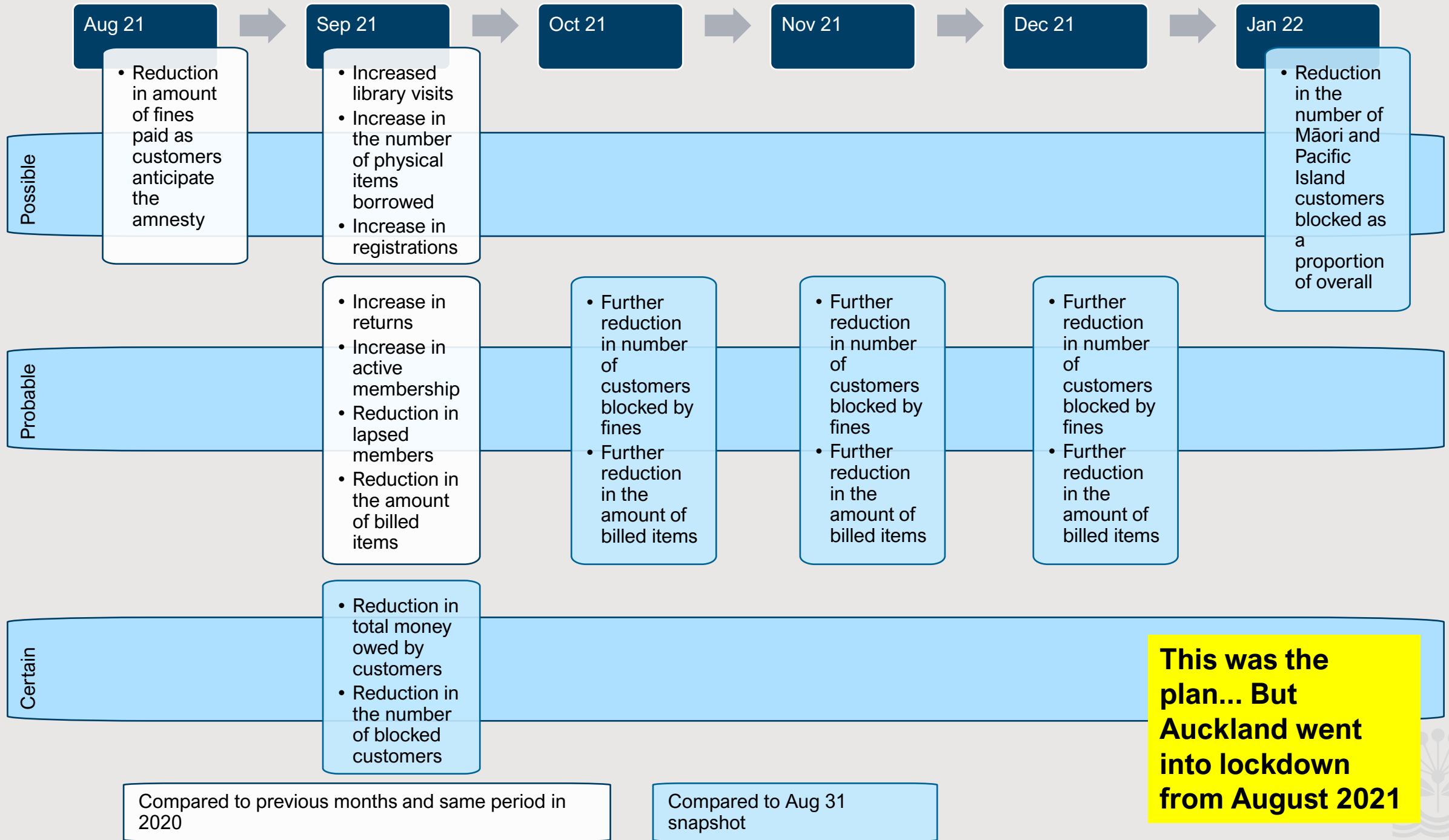
# What to Measure – remember your baseline 😊

- Amount of debt owed
- Distribution of debt by ethnicity (Māori, Pacific, other) or neighbourhood or type (eg children)
- Number of patrons blocked by ethnicity (Māori, Pacific, other) or neighbourhood
- Percentage of debt actually collected

- Borrowing
- Checkins
- If you can – time to return – increase or decrease or same?
- Number of billed items

- New patrons
- Numbers of active patrons
- Number of lapsed patrons





# Library management system (Sierra) configuration to update

**Update existing  
loan rules or  
add new?**

**Loan rule  
determiner**

**Text of notices**

**Purge existing  
overdues**

We did both

As we added new  
loan rules, we had to  
update this as well

Review notices to  
see if any wording  
should change for  
overdues and bills

There was no way to  
globally remove billing  
fees on items that  
were billed already

**Export and highlight  
changes**



# Hearts and minds

Think about who will make the decision – are they supporters? Detractors? Unsure? Some will want the hard facts and numbers. Some will want to hear the stories of impact – what it means for communities and individuals. Collect and present both!

*“I only ever check out children's books as the cost of overdue fines for adults is too high. Living in a rural location it is not simple to go to the library to return books with the time and cost of gas and having merely 5 books out would be a fine of \$5 for each day overdue.”*

*“I didn't want to come back to the library – I was scared about the fine. I'm so happy I don't have to pay anything”*

*“We didn't have books in my house so I went to the library for my homework. Then I got some overdue fines and my family couldn't afford to pay them. I never went back.”*



# Library cops or safe and welcoming space for our communities?

“Studies show fines don’t get people to bring their stuff back on time,” said Misty Jones, San Diego’s head librarian. “All they do is create this narrative where when someone brings up the library, the first thing people think of is fines. “



# Useful resources

[fine free policies report SC-2019-10-15.pdf \(libraryconnection.info\)](#)

[2020.06.01 EPL Fine Free Report Board.pdf](#)

[Abolishing fines: UK status \(publiclibrariesnews.com\)](#)

[Fine Free Resources - Public Library Director Toolkit - LibGuides at North Dakota State Library](#)

<https://www.iii.com/blog/new-approach-to-equity-eliminating-late-fees/>

