



# Why are libraries going fine free?

**Q** If we remove fines won't that mean no one will return their books?

**A NO.** Overseas evidence has shown that people are more likely to return books once fines are removed.

*People feel embarrassed and ashamed when they have fines, and often stop using the library.*

**The City of Sydney (AUS):** without the threat of a fine, books were three times as likely to be returned.

**High Plains Library District (US)** stopped fines in 2015. 95% of materials are now returned within a week of the due date.

**Chicago Public Library (US):** 240% increase in overdue material returns one month after going fine free and wiping all debt in 2019.

**Q** Will there be an incentive for people to return borrowed items?

**A YES.** Libraries have applied or retained measures to encourage the return of borrowed items.

*Libraries that remove fines use these incentives and assistance:*

- Borrowers are still billed for lost books if not returned by the set time.
- If they have debt owing (of an amount the library sets) they can't borrow anything else.
- Maximum loan limits.
- Email and SMS reminders are sent before and after due dates.
- Automated renewals which apply unless there are holds reduce overdue items.

**The Grande Bibliothèque Quebec (CA):** removed fines but blocks patrons from borrowing when books are overdue.

**Q** Will removing fines result in increased borrowing?

**A YES.** Removing fines tends to result in more customers borrowing more items.

There has been essentially no discernible difference in the amount of time that people keep materials since public libraries began their no-fines policy. **Far North Libraries:** 112% increase in borrowing 11 months after removing fines for children and Young Adults. **Salt Lake City Public Library (US):** 16 % increase in issues in the first year after removal of fines and an 11% increase in checkouts and borrowers in the following year. **San Rafael Public Library (US):** 16% increase in children's material circulation within 6 months and a 40% increase in youth borrowers after dropped fines for children's materials. **Stark County District Library (US):** 11% increase in circulation within one year.

**Q Will borrowers have to wait longer for popular books?**

**A NO.** Internationally, libraries have experienced little or no impact on wait times.

**Gleason Public Library Massachusetts Ela Area Public Library (US):** "holds" or wait times remained steady after enacting fine-free policies.

**Q What is the financial impact? Won't this mean the library has less money to buy books and provide services?**

**A NO. NOT NECESSARILY**

Depends on how Councils implement the removal, and how significant this revenue was as a percentage of the budget. Revenue from fines was already decreasing in New Zealand as more people borrow e-Books.

If everyone returned their books on time, there would be no revenue! Many libraries convince their Councils that the loss is acceptable given the expected increase in library usage, especially for children. This seems to be the case when the fines money is a minor percentage of the total library or Council budget. Overseas, some libraries sought external funding, while some NZ libraries used NZLPP funding to mitigate the loss for the Council in the first year of implementation. Libraries have looked for alternative revenue-generating services, such as accepting passport applications. Although these initiatives do not make up the whole revenue loss, a common strategy is simply accepting donations, often via a donation (or "guilt") jar at the circulation desk or a simple Donate Button on the website.

**Auckland Libraries and Wellington City Libraries:** using the Long-Term-Plan or the Annual Plan process allowed them to spread the loss of revenue across Council, so there was no drop in funding for library services. **New York Public Library (US):** a one-time amnesty of \$2.25 million with support from a private organization, provided works to improve the quality of life for low-income people. **Halifax Public Library (CA):** is a registered charitable organization that views paying fines as a donation to the library and is grateful for members' support and gifts. **Cragin Memorial Library (US):** switched to pay what you want, a model with a fines jar, and found the amount of money collected increased.

**Q Do Libraries ever collect all the fines issued?**

**A NO.** Non- collection rates are subject to compassionate waiving on an individual basis and periodic debt write off.

During Covid lockdowns, many Libraries extended loans or waived fines to support their communities. **Auckland Libraries:** 33% of Fees & Charges revenue was never collected. Recovery rates were low and every year periodic write-offs of older debt were undertaken. In the five years up to 2019/2020, over \$4 million was written off.

**Q Aren't fines part of the core business of Libraries? Libraries have always charged fines, haven't they? If it worked for so long why stop them?**

**A NO.** Overdue fines are meant to encourage the return of borrowed items but in fact, drive people away from Libraries. Books don't get returned and borrowers instead stop coming.

**Columbus Public Library (US):** the library board eliminated overdue fines when they realized that fines not only weren't encouraging the timely return of materials—but that fines were actively working against the library's very reason for existence. We've shut off access to the library when one of our staunchest principles is trying to provide the widest access to materials that we can. It was seen as counter to the overall purpose and vision of our library.

**New York Public Libraries (US):** Visitor numbers increased from 9% to 15% (depending on the borough) 5 months after fines were removed.

**Q Will removing fines result in increased membership and retention?**

**A YES.** Once members have fines, they often stop using libraries, and their membership lapses.

2018, the Irish Government announced a new public library strategy that aimed to develop the country's libraries as a modern 21st-century public service. This strategy included providing a library service with no barriers to access and use, with no library fines or lending charges from January 2019 with the aim of doubling library membership from 750,000 to 1.5 million within five years. **Tasmania (AUS):** 2018, where libraries scrapped overdue fees, 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. **Oldham Library (UK):** 6.5% rise in new membership.

**Q Does removing fines result in increased trust in and enhanced reputation for Council?**

**A YES.** Removing fines Increases customer satisfaction and the morale of both customers and staff.

**Upper Hutt Public Library:** Customer feedback confirmed fear of fines was a reason for not coming back to the library. **San Diego Library (CA):** returning overdue items created an adversarial relationship between libraries and the people who use them, discouraging some from borrowing books and others from returning borrowed items on time and in good condition. Say the word library and the first thing people think of is fines.

**Q Do overdue fines impact some sectors of the community more than others?**

**A YES.** For Māori, Pacifica, other marginalised communities, lower socio-economic communities, and rural customers, fines are punitive, affecting mostly those who cannot afford to pay and preventing their use of libraries.

Customer feedback reveals that they only borrow children's books as the cost of overdue fines for adults is too high. Living in a rural location is not a simple matter to go to the library to return books with the time and cost of gas involved plus having books out with an overdue fine of \$5 for each a day. **Chicago Public Library (US)** - One in three cardholders in the public library's south district, where communities are mostly of color and living in poverty, could not check out books. That's compared to one in six people in the wealthier north district. **Puke Ariki in New Plymouth:** identified barriers for communities using the public library Community Consultation in March 2022). Pacific groups mentioned that fees including overdue fines and the fear/shame of being fined were the main barrier to using the public library. **Auckland Libraries:** a large number of members who were blocked from borrowing for a debt of over \$10 were from the lower socio-economic areas of Tamaki Makaurau, (South and West Auckland) and were more likely to be Māori or Pacific ethnicity.

Verbatim comment from Māori nonuser (non-user research 2019) - I'm a solo mum and I've racked up enough debt with my mental health and my business course, I don't want to add any more debt, but if it's free, that would help me so much. If it was free, I would do it.

**Christchurch City Libraries:** feedback on removing fines That's awesome. I stopped borrowing for a while as unfortunately sometimes I got fines when I wasn't that organised. Imagine you borrow a few items, and the fines can be Huge for a stay-at-home mum like me.

**Q Are there any other benefits?**

**A YES.** Removing fines simplifies your Library Management systems settings, making them easier to use and to collect the measures you want to analyse.

**Auckland Libraries:** reduced the number of “loan rules” substantially, resulting in simpler conditions of use for customers. Previously each format and each audience level needed a different explanation of rules, now most items are free to borrow and have no late fines so there are few exceptions (rental DVDs and CDs, and anything with a different loan periods).

**Q Do libraries forgive the historic debt and wipe all overdue charges?**

**A NO. NOT NECESSARILY**  
*Libraries have taken different approaches.*

**Christchurch, Wellington, and Porirua Libraries:** removed historic debt from fines.

**Auckland Libraries:** removed all debt from overdue charges but retained debt from lost and damaged charges. An amnesty is planned to help members reduce this debt in 2022.

Other approaches include:

- wiping all existing and historic debt
- wiping all debt from overdue charges but retaining debt from lost and damaged items charges
- using amnesties to reduce debt including debt wiped for food / activity / other reasons on an individual basis

**Q What about debt agencies?**

**A** *Some libraries use debt agencies to reduce the time staff spend on this task. This makes overdue fines more stressful and stops people from returning to libraries out of fear and shame.*

Non-use of debt agencies improves the relationship with customers and reduces the fear of borrowing. It also returns control of debt write-off and the relationship with borrowers back to the library. A PLNZ survey in December 2021 revealed that only 19 respondents used debt agencies, with some of these having paused this to mitigate Covid hardships. **Auckland Libraries:** stopped using debt agencies before removing fines.

**Q Do Libraries have other charges – and should they review these?**

**A YES.** *Libraries should review their loan rules and fees and charges regularly to ensure they are still appropriate and relevant.*

Most libraries have policies and processes to allow for waiving on compassionate grounds. Reviewing these and what authority is needed to waive them can reduce the barrier on an individual basis.

Other fees and charges that can be reviewed:

- Rental fees for A/V
- Rental fees for Bestsellers
- Rental fees for all items
- Holds charges
- Replacement card charges

**Q** What if my Council won't go that far?  
Is there something we can do to progress by removing barriers?

**A YES.** Remove fines for children, stop using debt agencies, and review waiving criteria and authorisation.

Removing overdue fines for children and youth can be the first step. Thirteen of the 20 New Zealand libraries completely fines free in April 2022 had removed fines for children at an earlier date. As of April 2022, 51 libraries had no fines for children, 81% of all public libraries.

The 2021 PLNZ survey showed that many libraries charged for replacement membership cards, but anecdotal evidence is that this is rarely collected. There is minimal revenue impact to removing this charge and it ensures the borrower stays an active member. Switching to a virtual membership card, removes the charge for replacement cards and encourages ongoing membership.

**Toronto Public Library:** 2021 removed children's fines, 2022 removed all fines.

**Q** What about amnesties – do they work?

**A YES.** Amnesties do encourage people to return but have only a short-term effect. They can also be used as a way of reducing historic debt if this is not written off when fines are removed.

Twelve libraries in the PLNZ survey in December 2021 said they had ad-hoc or regular amnesties. **Auckland Libraries:** has planned a 3-month amnesty for later in 2022 to remove debt from lost and damaged books. To keep it simple and appealing it was decided to waive the debt based on customers having a conversation with library staff about what the library has to offer people rather than ask for any payment, food, or act of service. **Grey District Libraries:** has used donating food for the Salvation Army and "reading away your fines" to remove debt for their customers. **Leicester Libraries (UK)** used a one-month amnesty in 2020 to promote their services and encourage further reading. To take part in the amnesty, customers were asked to return any late books to a member of the library staff and borrow at least another book. All that was needed was one form of identification showing an address, so the customer details could be updated. **Chicago Public Libraries:** before removing fines completely, used amnesties for short-term relief for borrowers. The amnesty in 2016 resulted in over 15,000 new patrons and patrons returning their cards to good standing. This also included a return of over \$800,000 of CPL material. The late materials ranged from items only a few weeks overdue to one book that had been due in 1934!

## Q Should libraries measure the impact of removing fines?

**A YES.** Setting up measures before removing fine and comparing metrics, and monitoring customer feedback channels including social media are good ways to evaluate impact.

Once the campaign and amnesty are complete these should show how successful going fine free has been. **Auckland Libraries:** set up weekly reporting\* on some key indicators to measure and report the impact of removing fines such as:

- increase in use
- reducing blocked members
- reducing lapsed members
- increase in new members

\*This has been compromised by Covid lockdowns.

## Q What about a media campaign to get the message out to lapsed customers, is it worth it?

**A YES.** You need to tell people the barrier is gone.

Councils have used media releases, direct email mailouts, and campaigns to welcome people back and tell them the good news. This can also expose all the services people may not know libraries offer. **Halifax Public Library (Canada)** Goodbye, Fines. Hello, Library Media commented, "This change is long 'overdue'." **Auckland Libraries:** removed fines on 1 September 2021 in the middle of a Level 4 lockdown. This meant the campaign was postponed, and in April 2022 there were still 15,000 members blocked from borrowing and many lapsed members have not returned. An amnesty campaign is now planned for July 2022.

## Q Is there one good reason for removing fines?

**A YES.** It eradicates hardship!

We have many more child and teen borrowers, and many more happy families. In the end, one day, ten years from now, I think that is going to make a difference in this community as those kids are going off to university or into jobs. – **Far North Libraries, NZ**

**Q** Are there other resources I draw on to support my business case?

**A** YES. *There are many resources freely available on the internet.*

Here are some:

- [Grey District libraries want people to read away their fines \(newstalkzb.co.nz\)](http://newstalkzb.co.nz)
- [fine\\_free\\_policies\\_report\\_SC-2019-10-15.pdf \(libraryconnection.info\)](http://libraryconnection.info)
- [2020.06.01 EPL Fine Free Report Board.pdf](#)
- [Abolishing fines: UK stat us \(publiclibrariesnews.com\)](http://publiclibrariesnews.com)
- [Fine Free Resources - Public Library Director Toolkit - LibGuides at North Dakota State Library](#)
- [Eliminating Fines FAQs - Colorado Virtual Library](#)
- <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>
- [Fines free Long Overdue? Library Life issue 487 October 2021](#)