

LIBRARY

Life



kōrero paki
fiction

pakiwaituhi
graphic novels

IN FOCUS

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AND

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Central Hawkes' Bay District Libraries have been fine-free for over 20 years and recently opened Te Huinga Wai - Knowledge and Learning Hub in Waipukurau. Image credit: Central Hawkes' Bay District Libraries

without having to worry that **they owe something, or are blocked from borrowing.**"

"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 five books out would be a fine of \$5 for each day overdue."

Auckland Libraries User

New Zealand libraries are part of a recent global trend to remove library overdue fines. The trend toward free-fine started from 2017-18 in the United States, United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Australia. In October 2017, New York Public Libraries, the largest library system in the United States offered a one-off fine amnesty for children and teens. CEO Anthony Marx said, **'It is unacceptable that families have to choose between dinner and using the library, but we know that this is a reality for many New Yorkers.'** \$2.25 million in collected fines was waived during this amnesty,

but the **10 cent per day** overdue fee for children was reinstated and is still in place today.

Chicago Public Libraries found amnesties in **2012** and **2016** more effective than fines for getting materials returned and in 2019 it became the largest city, and the largest public library system in the US, to **eliminate overdue fines**. It was **reported that Chicago saw a 240% increase in return of materials** within three weeks of implementing its fine-free policy and also had 400 more card renewals compared with the same time in the previous year.

In addition to fines, libraries may also suspend borrowing privileges. A **2017 survey** of 454 libraries in the United States found that 97 percent suspended borrowing when fines passed about \$10. In December 2018, the Urban Library Council reported that **'roughly 50 libraries had eliminated fines or fees for**

some or all patrons' in the USA and the number has continued to grow. Denver Public Library moved to free-fine in 2018 and **the Denver Post reported that after one year** of free-fine 35% of patrons who had stopped using library services had re-engaged. In January 2019, **San Francisco Public Library published a report** that recommended the library cease the collection of late fines for patrons of all ages. The library had been fines-free for children and teens since 1974; however, adults from low-income communities, African American communities, and communities without advanced degrees were the most frequently blocked from accessing the library due to overdue fines. San Francisco Public Library announced in September 2019 that it was fabulously fines-free and on the first day **wiped clear fees from some 260,000 patrons**. This shift to fines-free made the transition to closing the library system in March 2020 due to COVID-19 lockdowns easier, as patrons just kept physical items with no anxiety about fines. Over



next year, **the San Francisco Public Library has worked with the school district** to ensure every student has a library card and access to a digital school library, which is now being used regularly by students in every part of the city.

In the United Kingdom, only a couple of libraries had a fines-free policy prior to 2018. **Trafford Libraries, was the first library service** of any significant size in the UK to remove fines and reported that in the first full year (April 2018 to April 2019), the number of books issued went up by 4% on the previous year, and the number of visitors rose by 3%. From April 2019 to the end of December 2019, there had been a further increase of 17% for the number of books issued, and a **6% bump in the number of visitors to the libraries**. Oldham Library removed fines in August 2019, and reported a **6.5% increase in new people joining the library than the year before**.

In 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. In Australia, there have been no library fines in the Northern Territory for some years. In **2017, the City of**

Sydney announced it would waive fines for four years, after a 12-month trial showed that three times the number of overdue books were returned. Tasmania is one of lowest-ranking Australian states for literacy, with **nearly half of the Tasmanian population functionally illiterate** and in 2018 became the first state to completely abolish fines. Within four months, **membership had increased by 8,000 people**, many of whom had overdue fines. Executive director, Liz Jack said most new members were younger than expected, **with more people in the 30-39 demographic joining a library**. The **Yarra Plenty Library system** in Victoria removed fines for children and teens in 2018 and 11 months later reported a 57 per cent increase in young adult items borrowed by members aged between 12 and 15. The **Australian Capital Territory** abolished fines in November 2019, erasing \$1.86 million of existing fines some dating as far back as 15 years, however the full impact of this initiative may be hard to track due to the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020.

In New Zealand, many public libraries stopped charging overdue fines during COVID 19 lockdowns, when library patrons were unable to physically return books. In April 2020, **Masterton District Library** announced it would continue the free-fine approach started in lockdown. **Selwyn Libraries also dropped fines** during the 2020 lockdown and in August 2020 announced that the council had given backing to continue for a two-

year trial.

Upper Hutt Libraries became the fourth public library to become fines-free for all users from November 2020. The library undertook extensive research internationally to identify the impact of libraries going fines-free, the financial impact on removing fines and how to offset this loss of income. Marion Read explains, "It was fortunate for us that the fee waiver subsidy we received from the New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme was able to offset the loss of income for the first two-year period."

Becoming free-fine for children and youth, has enabled some libraries to make the case for becoming free-fine for all users. Both Upper Hutt Libraries and Nelson Public Libraries had previously removed fines from all children's material and seen ongoing benefits in increased membership and library usage by children and benefits for tamariki and their whānau. Nelson Public Libraries became free-fine for all users from July 2021 and Sarina Barron, Nelson Libraries Manager explains, "We knew that removing overdue fines for adults would not only bring people back to the library, but also create a culture of inclusivity. While it's too early to say definitive numbers, but we have absolutely welcomed new members who hadn't used the library due to fear of accruing overdue fees. It has also been a lot easier for our staff. There are fewer upset customers and this is a win for both them and us."

**138,203 books.
Zero late fees.**

**Borrow more.
Worry less.**

**Zero
Fines
Now.***

**Zero
Fines
Now.***

WAIMAKARIRI
LIBRARIES

WAIMAKARIRI
LIBRARIES

Fines Free Facebook Advertisements. Image credit: Waimakariri District Libraries

At Waimakariri Libraries in North Canterbury, all library users were fined for overdue items. In a proposal to council to request approval to implement a zero overdue fees policy it was noted that approximately 1,000 library users under 18 year old were blocked from using library services, due to relatively small fines, even if the overdue items had been returned. The proposal was approved and **Waimakariri Libraries became free-fine from July 2021**. Library manager, Paula Eskett acknowledges the generous support of other public libraries around New Zealand to develop the Waimakariri Libraries proposal; including Nicki Moen at Selwyn District Libraries, Marion Read at Upper Hutt Libraries and Corin Haines at Masterton District Libraries. "Support from other public library managers was crucial for our library service becoming free-fine this year."

Timaru District Libraries and **Ōpotiki Libraries** became free-fine for all users in mid-2021. Library Manager Jo Hunt explains, "Libraries are paid for through rates, like sports fields and playgrounds, so that the whole community has facilities

they can use and benefit from. Of course, fines aren't how we fund our building or new resources or staff time, so they don't add anything except put up an unnecessary barrier. At any point in time we probably only have a small handful of overdue books, so they are not a significant problem. We like to stay in close contact with our borrowers – checking in, sending text reminders and offering loan extensions rather than penalty charges. Removing fines means that all borrowers existing and new can relax, borrow and enjoy the resources – sharing is caring!"

Up to 75% of New Zealand public libraries are fines-free for children and teens. **Far North District Libraries** scrapped fines for children and teens in July 2020 and **Hamilton City Libraries in July 2021**. Chris Pigott, Far North District Libraries Manager explains what was required to become free-fine; "Elected member approval was required, so we had to prepare papers and presentations for council meetings; and then complete a public consultation exercise. There was a fair amount of

desktop research as well to identify what was happening in NZ and around the world, and to also identify arguments being made to get councils/library boards and communities over the line."

Hamilton City Libraries Manager Stephen Penruscoe explained that it can be hard for families to **keep track of the items their teenagers and children borrow**. "While library fines don't have a big financial impact on some families, it can mean less food on the table for others." To celebrate the fee waiving, Hamilton's libraries ran a month-long 'pay it forward' campaign with a foodbank drive, open for non-perishable donations between 1 July and 1 August, running from each of Hamilton's six libraries. Stephen reports that, 'New junior and young adult memberships increased 48% and issues increased by nearly 20% in the first month. However this growth was impacted by lockdown in August."

What are the outcomes of becoming a fines-free library? At Upper Hutt Libraries Marion Read notes, "Huge benefits are the noticeable difference



Kaitiāia Library. Image credit: Far North District Libraries

in the attitude of people using the libraries. We are no longer having those negative interactions at the customer service points when we had to inform customers that they had outstanding fines to pay. Staff have been able to focus on delivering positive services – customers are more positive about their libraries and customer feedback overall has been very positive.” Nelson Public Libraries have had a similar experience, “While it is too early to say definitive numbers, we have absolutely welcomed new members who hadn’t used the library due to fear of accruing overdue fees. It has also been a lot easier for our staff. There are fewer upset customers and this is a win for both them and us.”

Chris Piggott reports that after one year of free-fine at Far North Libraries, “Our child and youth borrowing has increased by 112% percent in the one year and one month that we have been free-fine. 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.”

Have libraries experienced any negative or unforeseen issues after going free-fine? Marion Read says that items took longer to be returned at Upper Hutt Libraries and the staff have put in systems in place to remind customers that they need to return or renew their items they have out. “We have been able to utilise the time previously taken up to manage fines and cash accounting to put into reminding people to return items. If the system generated reminders haven’t worked we do take the time to phone customers before they are billed for items not returned that we have deemed to be lost. We generally get positive feedback on this service with people appreciating the personal contact.”

Sarina Barron shares that at Nelson Public Libraries there were a few negative concerns expressed by users that people would just ‘hold on to their borrowed books’ and that it would impact on access to the collection, especially the popular, newer titles. “However we have not seen any evidence of this, and like with most libraries, we have a process where we charge for the cost of a book if it is not returned within a certain period of time.”

Chris Piggott says the free-fine for children has been 100% percent positive. “The rate of loss has not notably increased, and the rate of reading has sky rocketed. I flog myself every night for failing to make a strong enough case for us to be completely fine free – I think the full benefit is not realised until adults in our district have that barrier, perceived or real, removed as well.”

Wairarapa Library Service will be the next library ‘in the news’ as it extends fines-free to adults from October 12. Library Manager Annette Beattie describes the information the councils used to decide to remove overdue fees, “The key aspect was the removal of barriers to accessing a community-owned resource and encouraging long term use of it by our community. Our councillors understood that overdue fees are a decreasing and unstable revenue source, that fines create an uncomfortable customer-staff dynamic, and perpetuate a negative stereotype of libraries as punitive. Fines are not charged for prolonged usage of other council provided services e.g. long swims at swimming pools. Our councils agreed that ensuring the maximum number of people have access

to libraries to grow skills, enjoy collections, connect with others and with ideas, is of primary importance, and removing bureaucratic barriers to that makes sense." Annette outlines her hopes for the free-fine approach, "Potentially being free-fine will bring back over 400 library customers who are currently debarred because of unpaid overdue fees. If adults are not using the library, it is likely their children are not. We hope to see adults return or begin to use the library and bring along their children also."

"I think free-fine is fantastic – equity and free access to all is so important in today's society and libraries moving to fines-free is an important component of this.

It also assists in the removal of that invisible barrier which still persists - that the library is not a place for everyone, when it absolutely is. The more that libraries can do to demonstrate this, the better. "

Sarina Barron
Nelson Public Library Manager

Dyane Hosler, Chair of Public Libraries New Zealand describes the response by library managers to a challenge made at their forum for all public libraries to become free-fine, "A roar of approval followed, and since then a working group has been formed and a campaign is being developed with the purpose of providing public library managers with support material

to assist them in their journey of becoming fine free."

It is heartening to see an increasing number of libraries, library services and systems around the world removing library fines. However, there is a lack of robust evidence in New Zealand and other countries about the impact of removing fines on communities. A report in 2020, *Overdue Fines: Advantages, Disadvantages, and How Eliminating Them Can Benefit Public Libraries* noted that evidence about fines-free

was either old or small-scale, with little investigation into libraries that have eliminated fines, and how this change has impacted their communities. Evidence is essential for libraries to build a strong case to move to a fines-free approach. Maintaining the momentum of what may become a 'free-fine movement' in New Zealand requires

public libraries to evaluate this initiative, gather local data and stories and collate a body of national evidence to effectively communicate to councils and stakeholders the impact on communities of removing the barrier of library fines.

WHAT ABOUT TERTIARY LIBRARIES ?

Tertiary libraries supported students by waiving fees during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Victoria University of Wellington Library Client Services Manager Glenn Reddiex, says that "It would be unfair for our student community to incur fees during lockdown. Furthermore, if we hadn't taken positive action to waive fines it would be one further layer of worry and concern for our student community." Many tertiary libraries have reduced the impact of fines on students by only charging fines on short-term, recalled or high demand items. At AUT University the senior management made the decision to be fines-free four years ago. Gillian Barthorpe Director Collections and Engagement Director explains that, "Fines free for the Main Collection has been of benefit to students as they are no longer prevented from accessing essential resources for their studies due to outstanding fines blocking their account. The only area where it has been a problem is the late returns in the Short Loan Collection, which are items in high demand for course work. However, with the greater shift to online resources this has become less of an issue." Students do face loss of borrowing privileges if their item limit is exceeded or if they have one overdue recalled item.



Ana Pickering; is the LIANZA Executive Director. The idea for this article was hatched a few months ago and she is grateful to the all library managers who generously responded to questions and provided information on their library service's fines-free journey. She says, "It was very interesting researching this feature, but very difficult to find robust research on the impact and outcomes of fines-free initiatives in libraries." If she had access to research journals she would have been able to conduct a more thorough literature search. "It is such a great topic for a PhD and if I had more time, it would be very tempting !"