



AUSTRALIAN
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ALLIANCE



Australian Library and
Information Association

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance statement on fines for overdue items in Australian public libraries

Background

A growing number of Australian public libraries are removing fines for overdue items. This is in line with the global movement to make libraries more accessible for all people in our community.

There have been no library fines for overdue items in the Northern Territory for some years. Libraries Tasmania and Libraries ACT have introduced a no-fine approach across their jurisdictions. In other states, an increasing number of library services have removed overdue fines.

ALIA (APLA) support the removal of overdue fines because:

- Library fines undermine one of the core principles of public libraries - the provision of free and universal access to information.
- The people who can least afford to pay fines are often the ones who need the library service the most.
- There is no evidence that overdue fines encourage meaningful compliance.
- Library fines create a disproportionate administrative burden on staff.

A number of trials have established that often the cost of collecting overdue fines is greater than the revenue received.

Overdue fines are also a distraction from the core work of public libraries: lending items, encouraging reading and facilitating free access to information.

There have also been some surprising outcomes. It appears that removal of overdue fines encourages the return of lost items rather than acts as a deterrent.

ALIA acknowledges that public library services are financially constrained and that income from fines can form an important part of their revenue stream. This can make the transition away from overdue fines challenging.

There are a number of strategies that have been put in place by libraries who have removed overdue fines to ensure that items are returned in a timely fashion.



These include:

- Implement 'support to comply' process that uses restrictions on membership as a lever rather than overdue fines
- Maintain capacity to recover costs for lost items
- Encourage people with overdue items to donate to literacy programs or non-perishable goods via the library for local charities to make good
- Reminder email and SMS alerts for borrowers to return or renew items

Recommendations

The ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance makes the following recommendations to library services currently charging fines for overdue items.

- Review your fines policy, carry out a full financial assessment to uncover the true cost of monitoring and collecting fines
- Take note of other libraries' experience in terms of the return of items when overdue fines have been lifted
- Survey your community to evaluate the role of fines in deterring people from borrowing
- Inquire into the impact of library fines on those members of the community who are most in need of library services and can least afford to pay overdue fees
- Consult with your Council's financial and governance sections to determine the best way forward for your community
- Regularly review your policy in the context of national and international library trends
- If fines make a positive net financial contribution, aim to identify alternative sources of revenue
- Seek advice from your council PR and marketing team about the impact of library fines on image and reputation management
- Where overdue fines continue to be levied, consider running amnesty campaigns to encourage people to return items and renew their borrowing rights.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance, 27 November, 2019



Supporting information

In developing the policy, ALIA APLA took into account the experiences of libraries internationally. These are summarised in the following table.

	The case for fines	The case against fines
Barrier to access	The purpose of fines is to keep items in circulation for the benefit of all library users. This is an issue particularly for very popular items, which people like to hold onto for longer, increasing the time others have to wait.	Fines can be a barrier for people who aren't regular and confident library users, and especially for those from low socio-economic backgrounds who benefit most from book borrowing.
Financial impact	In some places, the sum raised through fines has become an anticipated income stream which enables less well-resourced libraries to run valued services and programs which might otherwise be at risk.	It can cost as much (or more) in staff time and financial processes to monitor and collect fines, as the sum raised by doing so.
Return of items	Fines are part of a process that manages the recovery of overdue items or financial recompense for their loss.	In a survey of NSW public library, nearly a third of respondents said that not charging overdue fines assisted in the return of items.
Reputation	Library books are a council asset and fines demonstrate a firm approach to asset management.	Public libraries aim to be a safe, welcoming place for everyone. Fines, leading to debt collection, do not support this image and can turn away people who need the service most of all.

In addition, ALIA APLA discussed alternative approaches to fines for overdue items.

Where public libraries have removed fines for overdue items, other devices have been put in place to encourage borrowers to return the items on loan. These include:

- Reminder email and SMS alerts for borrowers to return or renew items
- Automatic renewals through the library management system
- No fines for children and young people under the age of 18
- Amnesties for overdue items
- Requests through the media for the return of items by the community.



And stronger measures:

- Restrictions on library PC use and other services until overdue items are returned
- Charges for lost items
- Suspension of borrowing privileges.

This background is provided for the advice of libraries considering the case to remove their overdue fines.

