



**Libraries
Connected**

Library Fine Survey Summary Report

Executive Summary

A workshop and online survey took place in March 2022 to gain an insight into the current picture of library overdue fines across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Crown Dependencies, identify the barriers to removing library fines, and the impact removing them has had on libraires.

The research found that:

- The majority of library services still charge people for returning items after the due date.
- Many of these services are considering removing library fines.
- The main barrier to doing this is the loss of income which couldn't be easily offset by savings or new funding streams.
- A small number of library services had successfully removed library fines.
- Early reports showed removing library fines had increase membership and loans
- Service restrictions brought about by COVID-19 have made it very difficult for services to measure the impact.
- Evidence of impact was crucial for those trying to make a case for removing library fines.
- Further in-depth research is recommended with library services who have removed fines once services have been fully operational for 12 months or more to allow for a full year of data comparison.

1. Introduction

Following discussions about removing library fines on the Libraries Connected online networks in early 2022 we surveyed our members to capture data and gain further insight into the current picture, identifying what the barriers to removing library fines are and the impact removing fines has had on library services. Libraries Connected also ran a workshop session with the Advisory Committee to try and capture more qualitative data on the topic.

For the purpose of this report, when talking about 'library fines' we are referring to overdue charges which libraries have traditionally charged members if they return items after their due date.

2. Findings

2.1 The Workshop

The Libraries Connected Advisory Committee is made up of Heads of Service and Senior Library Managers who lead our Universal Library Offers and Chair our regional networks. To gain a better understanding of the issues surrounding library fines and how Libraries Connected might be able to support libraries wishing to build a case for removing fines, we ran a short workshop at the committee meeting in March 2022.

To begin the workshop participants were asked what they saw as the top 3 pros and cons of removing library fines. Their answers were used to generate two word clouds (see below).



- Some library service had taken the opportunity not to reintroduce some charges post covid, but not all have been able to make a business case to do the same. This was most often due to local political and financial pressures.
 - Some library services had removed fines for specific membership categories. This was commonly done for children and young people and children in care.
 - Comments showed that looking at removing overdue charges for children was a more easily achieved first step compared to removing fines for all members.
- B. What impact has removing fines had on user profiles, stock circulation, budgets etc.?
- Where children's fines had been removed libraries had seen a slight increase in membership and issues. It was noted that, as adult fines are larger removing them may have a bigger impact.
 - Where fines have been removed, some libraries had been renewing books automatically several times before asking for them back.
 - The feeling of the Advisory Committee was that overdue charges impact more on low-income families and the most disadvantaged.
 - One library service had run focus groups with customers before removing fines and were surprised to find that those attending hadn't seen fines as a barrier to library usage, although the demographic of this group may not have included many low-income families and disadvantaged people.
- C. What are the barriers to removing fines?
- Income loss is a big barrier as it needs to be offset by a new funding source or a service reduction. Libraries are continually trying to diversify income streams as they can see "traditional" ones are reducing, but most haven't been able to generate enough to offset library fines.
 - It is not always an individual library services decision to make e.g., where libraries are part of a consortium, or have community ran libraries the decision will impact on everyone in the partnership.
- D. What would you need to overcome these barriers? i.e., a statement in support of removing fines, evidence of positive impact etc.
- A national statement in favour of removing fines wouldn't be very useful and may have a negative political impact.
 - Research that could demonstrate that an increase in library use was attributable to scrapping fines would be very helpful.
 - If lots of services remove fines, there might be a tipping point in the sector where reputationally everyone needs to stay in step.
 - A business case for not charging fines which demonstrates the evidence of impact would be helpful. Particularly if it also looked at the time it takes to handle and manage cash compared to the cost of income gained.
 - A myth busting document e.g., removing overdue charges does not mean books are not returned with evidence to back it up.
 - Case studies showing where Community Managed and Volunteer Libraries have removed overdue charges and how they have made up the income.
- E. Have you removed any other charges? i.e., book reservations, hire charges, printing.



- Some library services had removed hire charges on CD's. DVD's collections on the other hand have seen a reduction in issues and so some libraires are looking to remove the collection rather than the hire charge.
- Where fines have been removed one library service had increased their lost book charges to encourage books to be returned.

2.2 The Survey

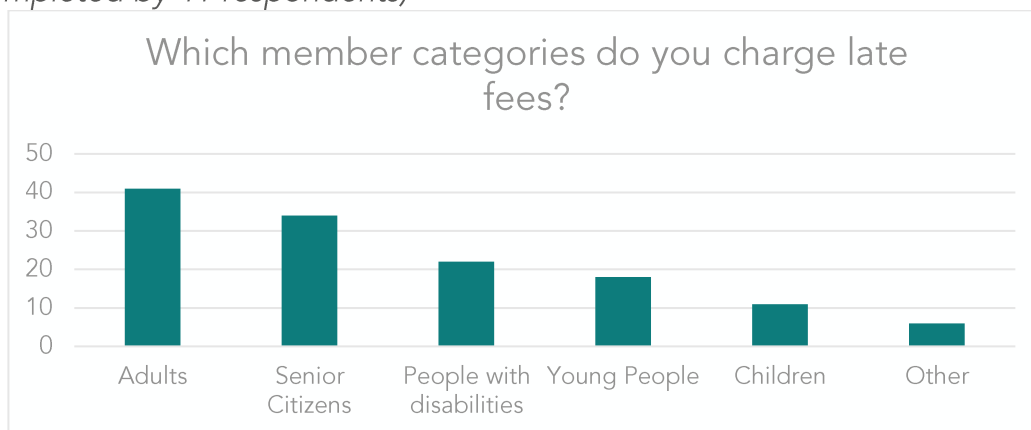
To gain a better understanding of the national picture and gather data on the impact of removing library fines, Libraries Connected conducted an online survey of its members. The survey was advertised via the Head of Service network and a weekly email for Senior Managers. Just one return per-library service was requested.

Once any blank or duplicate returns had been removed there were 61 responses to the survey, this is just over a third of the 176 library services in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Crown Dependencies. Of that 61, 16 said they had removed library fines, which at the time of the survey represented half of the 18 library services (excluding Scottish libraries) listed by [Public Library News](#) as having removed fines, and an additional 7 library services, including 1 who submitted very little data and 2 that had only temporarily removed fines.

2.2.1 Feedback from Library Service That Do Charge Fines

The 45 library services that do charge library fines were asked which member categories they charge late fees to, all charged late fees to 'adults', closely followed by 83% who charge 'senior citizens', far less (27%) charged 'children' and (44%) 'young people' (see chart 1). Comments from those selecting 'other' showed that in a few library services certain categories had reduced or capped fines, and one library service had several categories they didn't charge, including people with vision impairment, carers, and home library service customers.

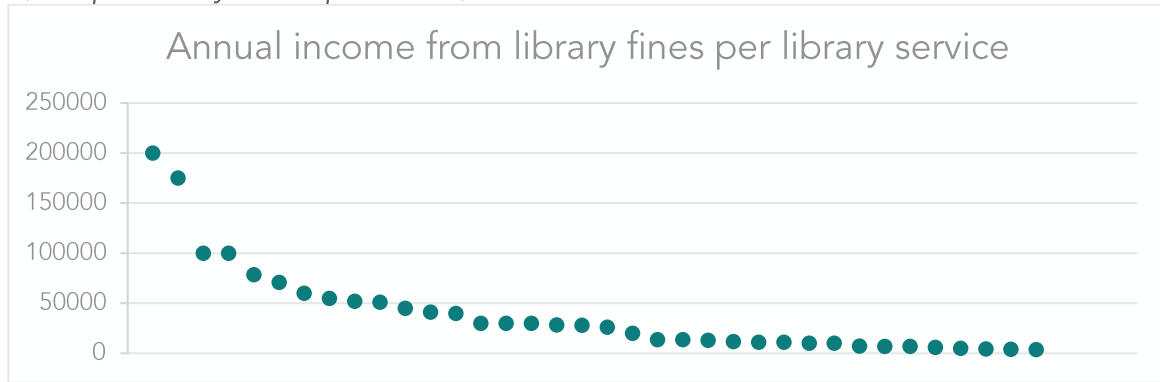
Chart 1 (completed by 41 respondents)



When asked how much income was generate from library fines per annum, the amount quoted by the 36 respondents that answered this question ranged from £200,000 to £3800, with an average of £38,870 and the majority (72%) generating under £50,000 income from library fines with a couple of outliers generating over £150,000 (see chart 2)

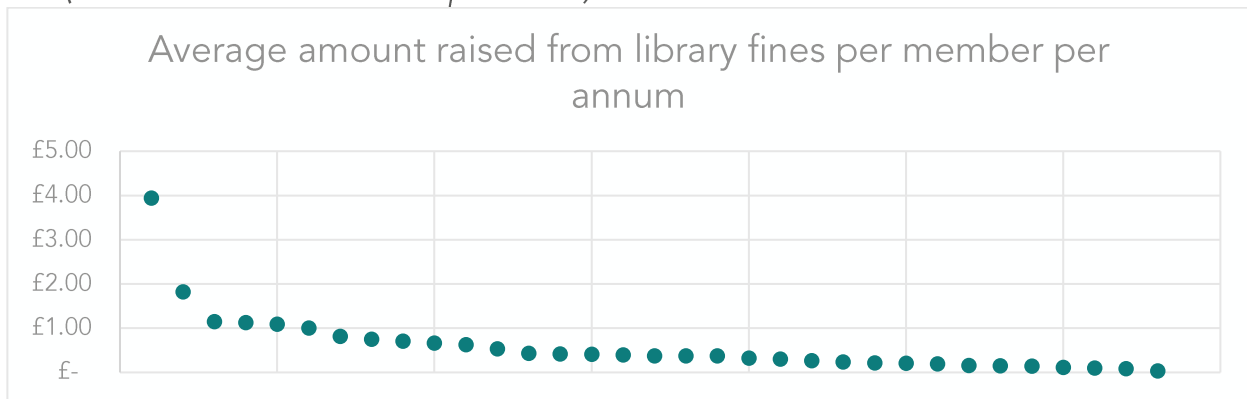


Chart 2 (completed by 36 respondents)



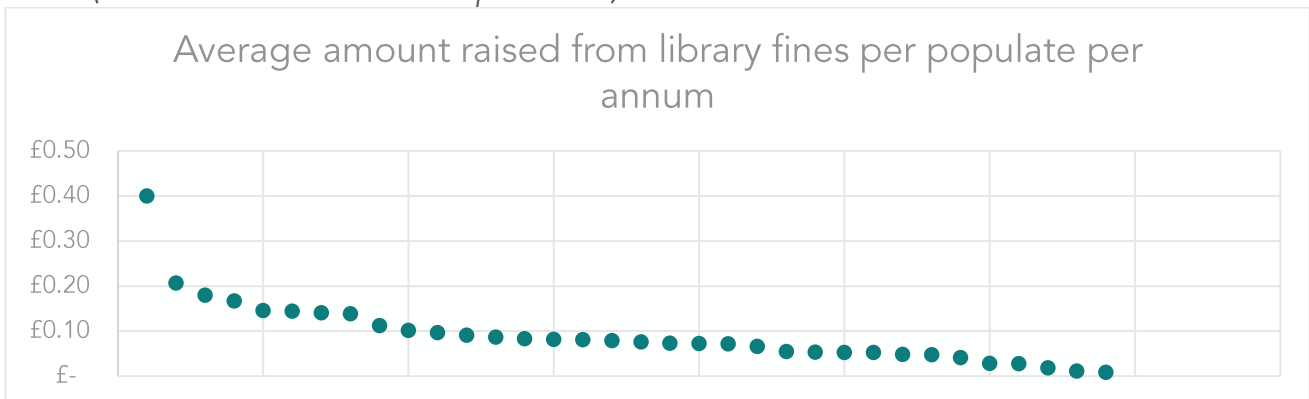
The average amount raised from library fines per library member per annum based on data from 33 library services ranged from £3.94 to £0.04 with an average of £0.58 and the majority (64%) having raised £0.50 or less (see chart 3), with just the one outlier raising over £2 per member. There were however some discrepancies around the membership figures as some quoted 'active' members (those that had used the library recently) while others quoted the total number of members.

Chart 3 (based on data from 33 respondents)



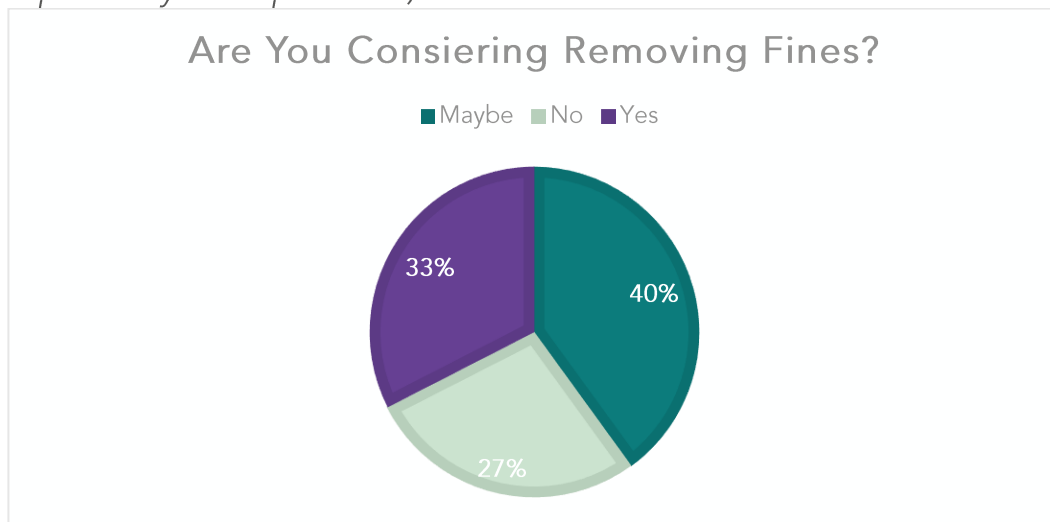
Based on data from 34 library services, the average amount raised from library fines per populate per annum in a library service area ranged from £0.40 to £0.01 with an average of £0.09 and the majority (74%) having raised £0.10 or less, with the one outlier raising over £0.21 per populate (see chart 4).

Chart 4 (based on data from 34 respondents)



When asked if they were considering removing fines there was an almost equal split between those saying, yes, no, and maybe (see chart 5).

Chart 5 (completed by 40 respondents)



Comments showed that those who said, 'yes' felt removing library fines would remove the stigma of overdue books, help tackle the poverty agenda, increase library use (particularly by people from deprived areas and those with lower incomes), and help recover the physical library offer post pandemic. A few also mentioned that they had suspended fines during Covid and were hoping not to reintroduce them.

Those that said, 'maybe' also felt fines had a negative impact on library use, particularly by people from deprived areas and those with lower incomes, and that removing fines would help the recovery of the physical library offer. In addition, they were concerned about the loss of income and interested in ideas on how they could make up the lost funding. They also wanted to see evidence that removing fines had a positive impact on library issues and membership.

For those that said, 'no' the big issue was that they couldn't afford to lose the income and they hadn't seen enough evidence that removing fines had an impact on library use. Some were also concerned about the loss of stock and book loans caused by people returning their books late or not at all.

When asked what the main barriers were to removing library fines the main issue was again the loss of income and concerns about customers not returning or not renewing books causing stock circulation problems and a reduction in issues for new books. Some also said that politically it would be difficult to justify removing fines when the council had a funding gap and services were being reduced. A lack of evidence showing the benefits also made it hard to argue the case, and there were some concerns about how it would impact community managed libraries who rely on the income they get from overdue charges.

When asked what they would need to make the case for removing library fines people told us they needed hard evidence to show that removing fines helped increase/keep members and stock issues, and evidence that it hadn't resulted in more items being returned late impacting on reservations, or not being returned at all resulting in a loss of stock. An analysis of the cost



of collecting fines would also be helpful, as would evidence showing that it encouraged lower income families to join the library. An alternative funding stream to recuperate the lost income was also essential for many as was support from DCMS and the Welsh Government.

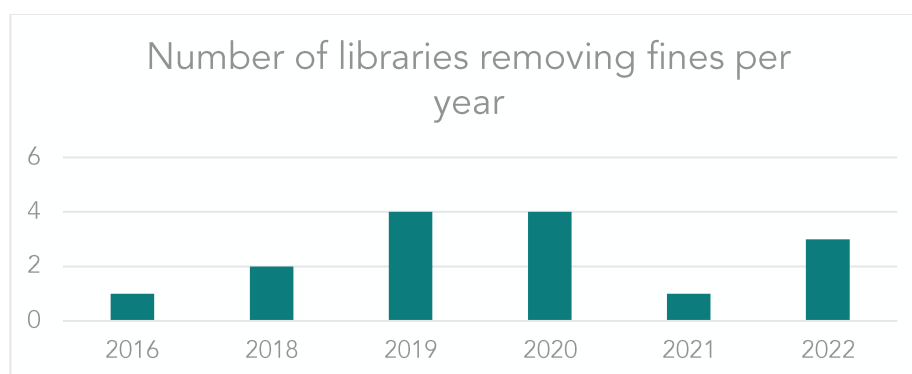
Other comments from those that hadn't removed library fines showed that library staff and leaders didn't like having to charge fines as they felt they were a barrier to accessing the library, but they weren't able to remove them without strong evidence of the positive impact and a way to make up the lost income.

2.2.2 Feedback from Library Service That Don't Charge Fines

16 library services told us that they had stopped charging library fines on late items. Two of the 16 had removed fines temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic and said it may not become permanent.

The library services that had removed library fines were asked when they stopped charging late fees. Responses showed that the first library service removed fines in 2016 followed by a small number each year since then (see chart 6).

Chart 6 (completed by 15 respondents)



When asked how they had made the case for removing library fines they told us they had used the following points to make their case:

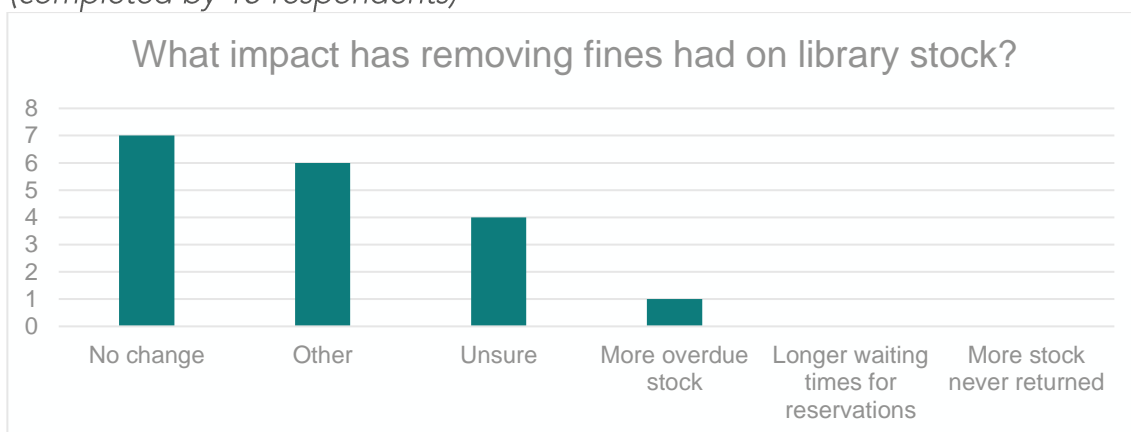
- Fines were a barrier to library membership, particularly for less affluent communities and families on low incomes.
- Fines were a barrier to returning overdue items.
- Removing fines would encourage lapsed users to return to the library.
- Not charging some membership groups i.e., young people, people with disabilities was creating conflict that frontline staff had to manage.
- Removing fines reduced staff costs for balancing cash and time to bank for those that went cashless at the same time.
- Removing fines and going cashless meant the library no longer needed payment facility on RFID kiosks so saved money.
- Income from fines had been dropping year on year.
- Automated renewals had already reduced the income from fines.
- Fines meant items were lost as people who couldn't afford the fines never returned, meaning the library never collected the money and lost the reader.



- There was an inequality with fines impacting more on people without digital skills or equipment as there are no fines on e-content.
- To support recovery fines were removed during the pandemic and not reintroduced.
- It created a much-needed good news story.

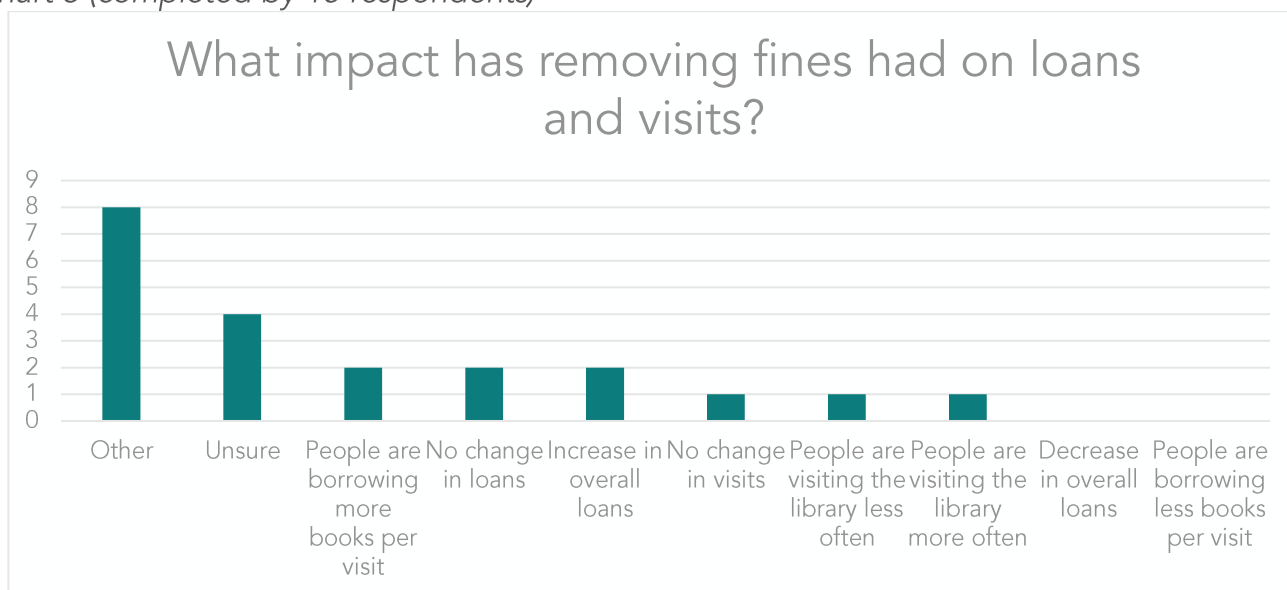
When asked what the impact of removing fines had been on stock the majority (47%) had seen no change (see chart 7). Other comments showed that there had also been a positive impact on customer relationships and staff resources. One library service said that they did have more books overdue, but it isn't by a huge amount (1% increase) and nothing that they were concerned about. Others said that fines hadn't been removed long enough outside of Covid restrictions to fully understand the impact.

Chart 7 (completed by 15 respondents)



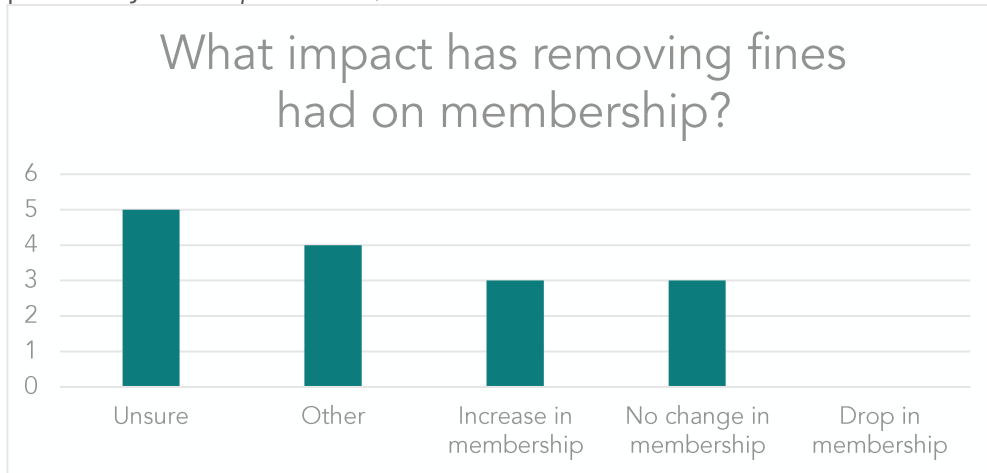
When asked what the impact of removing fines had been on loans and visits the majority were 'unsure', but no one had seen a decrease in overall loans or people borrowing less books per visit. Although there seemed to have been little impact on the number of visits, some libraries had noted an increase in loans (see chart 8). Other comments showed some evidence that lapsed users had returned, but most felt it was too early for them to have a proper understanding of the impacts.

Chart 8 (completed by 15 respondents)



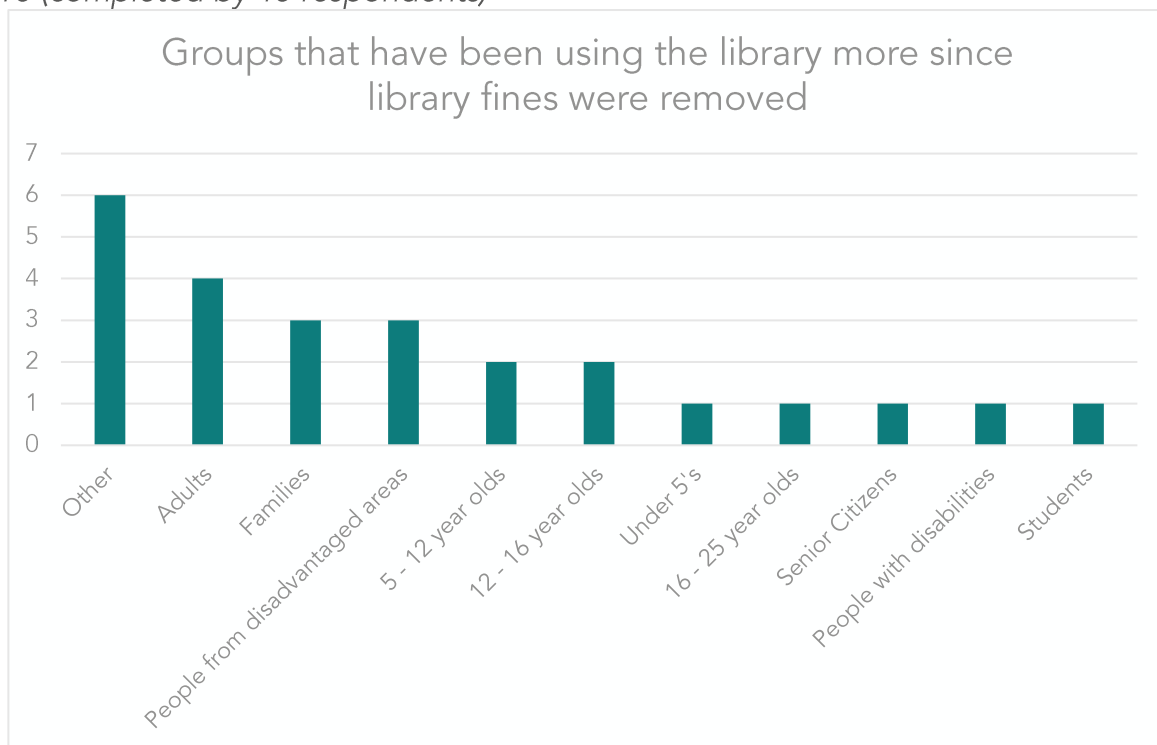
When asked what impact removing fines had had on membership the majority were again 'unsure', but those that had some data said membership had increased or not changed (see chart 9). Other comments showed that Covid restrictions had impacted on services making it difficult to accurately measure the impact of removing fines.

Chart 9 (completed by 14 respondents)



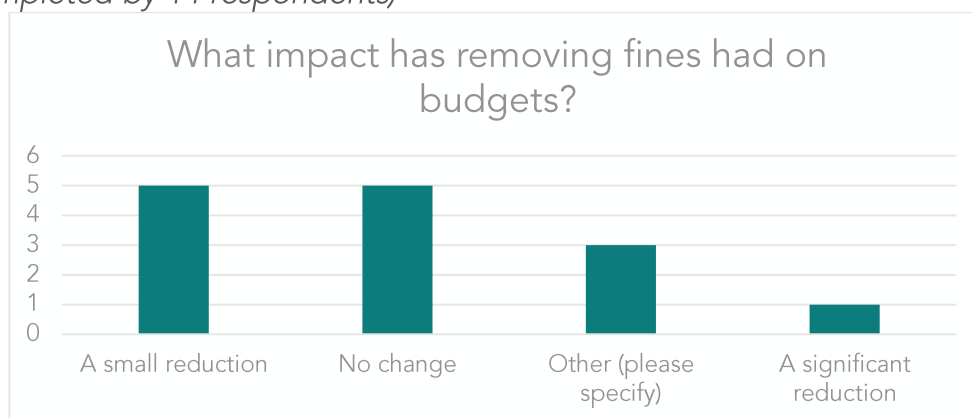
When asked if any libraries had seen an increase in specific groups of people using the library since fines were removed, the majority said that more adults were using the library, closely followed by families and people from disadvantaged areas (see chart 10). All groups had shown some increase, but the smallest change had been in under 5's, 16 – 25-year-olds, senior citizens, people with disabilities and students, comments suggested this might have been due to these segments having no or reduced fines prior to the full removal for everyone.

Chart 10 (completed by 10 respondents)



When asked what impact removing fines had had on budgets the majority said they had seen a small reduction or no change (see chart 11). Other comments showed that this was still under review for some or was difficult to judge because of Covid grants, and one respondent told us it had built it into their Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Chart 11 (completed by 14 respondents)



When asked what income libraries had been getting from fines prior to their removal the amount ranged from £30,000 to £3,000 with an average of £10,500 (see chart 12), with one outlier over £14,000. This average is significantly less than the average of £38,870 being generated by library services that are still charging fines. However, the average amount raised from library fines per library member per annum based on data from 11 library services ranged from £1.40 to £0.06, with an average of £0.43, which is only a little lower than the £0.58 per member per annum raised by libraries that are still charging fines. The average amount raised per populate per annum based on data from 12 library services ranged from £0.27 to £0.03, with an average of £0.09, which is the same as we saw for services still charging late fees.

Chart 12 (completed by 12 respondents)



When asked how the income was offset people told us they had:

- Absorbed the loss within the libraries' budget with savings from other areas e.g., stopped purchasing DVDs and Blu-rays.
- Offset with ICT system costs.
- Got acceptance from the board.
- Increased income from other revenue services.
- Saved money from not having fines (the overdue system cost for one library service cost around £10,000 per annum to run, when staffing costs were included).



Other comments from people who had removed fines showed that overall making no charges for overdue items had been very positive and much appreciated by customers. There had been some fears about books not being returned without fines but that hadn't happened. Removing fines had generated some positive publicity and resolved issues around fairness and accessibility, but Covid-19 arrived before many could do a year's assessment of the impacts.

3. Conclusions

The majority of library services still charge people for returning items after the due date but many offer concessions to certain membership categories, commonly children and young people. Many of these services were considering removing library fines as they felt they impacted disproportionately on those who are most disadvantaged and on lower incomes, caused conflict between staff and customers, and put people off returning late books or visiting the library again once they have money owing on their account. The main barrier to removing fines is the loss of income which most library services couldn't easily offset with savings or new funding streams. There were also concerns about the impact removing fines would have on collections and reservation services.

A small number of library services had successfully built a case for removing library fines, the first implementing this change in 2018, and managed to write off or offset the income loss through saving elsewhere or increasing income from other revenue services. Early reports showed removing library fines had helped increase membership and loans, but service restrictions brought about by Covid-19 have made it very difficult for services to measure the impact.

Evidence of impact was crucial for those trying to make a case for removing library fines, but with such a small amount of data from library services that have removed fines it was difficult for this study to draw any firm conclusions. Further in-depth research is recommended with library services who have removed fines once services have been fully operational for 12 months or more to allow for a full year of data comparison.



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