

27 April 2021

Notice of Motion: Cr Jamal Hakim, Abolition of fines at City of Melbourne libraries

Motion

That Council:

1. Recognises the important social, recreational, educational and economic roles played by libraries at a local community level.
2. Notes that in March 2020, City of Melbourne suspended the imposition of fines for the late return of library material and to date no revenue has been collected for such items.
3. Endorses management's decision that historical charges in relation to fines for overdue library material will not be pursued and shall be removed from Council records.
4. Acknowledges that the abolition of library fines associated with overdue material is likely to result in increased membership and use of services and removes a disincentive on the most impacted, namely the socially and economically disadvantaged, young people and people experiencing homelessness.
5. Resolves that City of Melbourne abolish library fines for overdue materials to allow libraries within the municipality to continue to grow as important assets and resources accessible to all within the community.
6. Requests that management undertake the following and provide Councillors with a briefing:
 - 6.1. Give consideration to the approach of managing and responding to lost or damaged library material with particular focus to supporting the most vulnerable within the community.
 - 6.2. Monitor and assess the impact of the abolition of fines over a two year period and report back to Councillors in August 2023.

Background

Since March 2020 library fines have not been imposed on any library members due to COVID-19 restrictions, which made returning library materials difficult for the public.

Management is currently developing a Libraries Framework to inform the future direction of City of Melbourne libraries and this framework will have a focus on increasing social equity and access.

Library fines undermine one of the core principles of public libraries, namely the provision of free and universal access to information. The fines disproportionately impact those who need library services the most - the socially and economically disadvantaged, young people and people experiencing homelessness, and act as a disincentive for using libraries. For this reason, many libraries across Victoria (23 libraries out of 49) have removed fines, including Port Phillip, Yarra, Hobson's Bay, Bayside and Moreland libraries. The City of Sydney Library (temporary at this stage), Libraries Tasmania, and Libraries ACT currently do not impose fines.

Removing library fines has positive outcomes on the community including increased library membership and use. After Yarra Plenty Regional Library abolished library fines in 2018, a 57 per cent increase was seen in young adult items borrowed by members aged between 12 and 15.

Public libraries provide communities with information and spaces that support their education, work and business. Spaces include access to the internet, charging stations and proximity to amenities that enable students, freelance workers and small businesses free and convenient places in which to work and learn.

While abolishing fines will have a small ongoing negative impact on the budget, the benefits to the community outweigh the revenue. In addition, the administrative overhead and negative customer experience of collecting fines would be removed.

By way of background, management advises the following:

- The original budget estimate for 2020/21 revenue projected an income of \$136,000. In response to COVID-19 lockdown measures, Council ceased to issue fines and no revenue has been collected.
- In 2019/20 \$93,242 was collected in fines.
- Whilst varying from year to year, it is estimated that between 50 to 70% of fines issued are not paid.

Removal of fines will build access and use of important community assets and will remove a potential barrier experienced by the most disadvantaged in the community. As suggested above, libraries without fines would be an additional attractor to new members.

The abolition of fines will be accompanied by a communication program. This will address measures such as suspension of borrowing privileges until return of items and provide the community with clarity on expectations around the those charges which will remain in place, namely those for:

- Lost or damaged library material with consideration to minimizing the impact on the most vulnerable within the community.
- Copying and printing, room hire, library bags, markerspace materials and some library programs.

Moved by: Cr Jamal Hakim

Seconded by: Cr Elizabeth Doidge