

Council to scrap library fines permanently

Overdue book fines are to be permanently scrapped by Edinburgh libraries – as the council prepares to write off almost £50,000 owed by library users.

Since the pandemic no overdue fines have been issued in the capital, and now the local authority will join a growing number across Scotland to completely do away with them.

Council officers said the charges are “increasingly viewed as being out of step with a modern, accessible, and welcoming service” and the move could result in increased use of a more “equal” service and help tackle poverty.

If approved by councillors this week, £49,390 outstanding on the libraries management system will be wiped. Due to an existing annual income target for overdue fees, a £114k hole will be created in the authority’s budget.

Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown and resulting closure of libraries, customers were charged 30p a day if a borrowed item was not returned on time, rising to 35p after seven days.

It is hoped that scrapping the penalties will encourage more people to return their late library stock as reports suggest they are “more likely to return their long overdue books to the library without the threat of an overdue fine,” a report said, “and that the practice of levying overdue fines has the opposite effect to what was intended with customers holding on

to books because they cannot afford to pay the costs.”

There are currently around 10,000 Edinburgh library books recorded as lost or missing, however this is down from 16,156 in 2019-20 when fines were last charged.

The council said it will “capitalise on the decision to abolish fines” by running a “high-profile communications campaign to encourage lapsed users to return to the library and new customers to join”.

The matter will go before a committee meeting this Thursday.

A report to councillors stated: “Overdue fines have been increasingly viewed as being out of step with a modern, accessible, and welcoming service and in recent years, a growing number of local authorities have taken the decision to permanently end fines for customers. In Scotland, 22 services have abolished fines with a further three suspending them until further notice.

“Evidence suggests fines act as a barrier to access for those who are least able to pay the charges with those who are from lower income households more likely to avoid use of the service which in turn has a wider impact on social disadvantage e.g. digital and social inequality.

“The removal of fines could help to tackle the poverty agenda and promote inclusivity by improving access to service for those who are most in need but who are most likely to be deterred by the potential of a financial penalty.

“Libraries will continue to issue automatic electronic reminders to users for due and overdue items “to act as a prompt for the timely return of items”.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter