



Report of the Chief Libraries, Arts and Heritage Officer

Scrutiny Board Children's Services

Date: 11th January 2007

Subject: Impact of the introduction of charges for late return of books borrowed by children.

Electoral Wards Affected:

Specific Implications For:

Ethnic minorities

Women

Disabled people

Narrowing the Gap

1.0 Purpose Of This Report

1.1 To update Scrutiny Board on the impact after six months of charges for the late return of books borrowed by children.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Over the last few years the Library and Information Service had a growing concern about the late return of books borrowed by children. The numbers had been increasing and by early 2006 there were on average 15,000 items overdue each day but by Easter this had risen to 25,000 items overdue on a given day.

2.2 This was having a serious impact on the range of books available for children. The council spends approximately £1.65 per capita on books a year and with the average price of a children's book about £9-£10 the service doesn't have the resources to fill the gaps created by these overdue. Also late returns often lead to lost books, increasing write-offs of stock.

2.3 The problem was compounded by the borrowing behaviours of children and particularly parents and carers. When library staff informally asked borrowers why the items were overdue the constant reply was "well there aren't any fines so we don't need to return them". Add to this the fact that individual parents and carers would take all the books available on a particular homework subject and keep them out until the work had finished then many other children, particularly those without parental support, were missing out on much needed study support.

3.0 Main Issues

3.1 Preparing for the introduction of charges:

Charges were not introduced until a series of support measures had been implemented. These included:

- provision of return anywhere so books could be returned to any library in the city
- introduction of a renewal facility on the website
- introduction of a simple 24/7 phone line where books could be automatically renewed (there is a clear link between renewing books and their eventual return whereas people not bothering to bring books back on their due date often lost track of the item and never returned it)
- reminder to borrowers of the contract they made when joining the library service to bring books back by their due date
- An amnesty to stimulate return
- A marketing campaign to children who were borrowing before the charges were introduced that charges were coming and how to avoid them. This ran for six weeks before charges were introduced (two loan periods)
- Waiving the first fine in July and explaining to the borrower what charge they would pay in future.

The service is currently piloting two new services to add to those above which customers will be able to opt into:

- Message left on your answer-phone telling you your books are overdue
- Text message to your mobile

3.2 Impact of the charges:

The introduction of charges prompted a small number (12) of formal complaints. In each letter the adult stated that while they returned their own books on time they didn't bother with their child's because it didn't matter. Most, when it was pointed out that they unfortunately weren't the only ones doing this, were quick to realize the issue. There were three cases of financial hardship or realistic cases where due to hospitalization or another trauma the charges had accrued and so the charges were reduced and pay plans agreed.

The impact on issues and borrowers was a concern and these have been monitored. The early trends reported within the first few months of the project have continued. The figures for six months to the end of December 2006 show:

- 7000 items overdue a day on average, over 50% reduction
- Books borrowed have increased by 6.5% on the same period last year
- The active borrowers 0-19 are 99.9% of the figure in April 2006
- In more detail the figures for the 0-10 and 16-19 have gone up, the decline is in the 11-15 age group – particularly around 14-15.
- It is impossible to identify the amount of money received from the charges as the computer system is not sensitive enough to identify the age range of the reader making the payment.
- Information from Debtors section has identified a reduction in the number of children being pursued for bad debt either because of large fines or large numbers of books overdue. (It is the guarantor of the child not the child that is followed up).
 - o In 2004-05 135 monthly average adults and 105 monthly average children
 - o In 2005-06 110 monthly average adults and 88 monthly average children
 - o In 2006-07 (Apr-Dec) 99 monthly average adults and 58 monthly average children

3.3 It is clear that the charges have the desired effect of reducing the books overdue each day. This has not had an impact on use although the service will investigate reduction of use by 14-15 year olds. This is always a difficult age for libraries but the service will investigate this further.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 The charges remained the same to children in the annual price rise this January and it is proposed to maintain them at this level for 2007. The service will continue to monitor impact.

5.0 Recommendation

5.1 That scrutiny board note the report.