Caring beyond the library: a case study of home library service in Lambeth Libraries

Jiayin Yu

Department of Information Studies, University College London, London, United Kingdom

jiayin.yu.24@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract. Public libraries are increasingly challenged to serve ageing and homebound populations who face barriers to physical access. This case study explores the Home Library Visit Service provided by Lambeth Libraries in South London, which offers free book and media delivery to residents unable to visit the library due to age, disability, or chronic illness. Drawing on on-site observation during a work placement and informal staff interviews, the study investigates how the service supports both informational access and emotional wellbeing. It identifies key features such as personalised book selection, continuity of service through assigned librarians, and meaningful relationships formed between staff and users. While the service demonstrates strong inclusivity and user satisfaction, it also faces challenges including limited staffing, low public awareness, and a lack of formalised policies and emotional support structures. Based on these findings, the study recommends the introduction of structured feedback mechanisms, formal service documentation, and better support for staff wellbeing. It concludes that Lambeth's human-centred approach offers a sustainable and adaptable model for inclusive public library outreach, with potential implications for other regions, particularly where home-based services are still emerging or underdeveloped.

Keywords: home library service, inclusive library practice, outreach services, emotional support

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Public libraries play an essential role in supporting equitable access to information and cultural participation. However, ageing populations, rising chronic illness, and increasing care responsibilities have posed new challenges to traditional, location-based library services. For some groups, such as older adults and individuals with disabilities, being unable to physically visit the library has become a persistent barrier to access.

In response, international frameworks have increasingly called for inclusive, flexible service models. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Public Library Guidelines state that collections and services should reflect the diverse needs of users, including older adults and people with disabilities [1]. The revised IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Disabilities further advocate for home delivery to provide good service to all community members [2]. In the UK, the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 created a statutory duty for local authorities in England and Wales "to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons" [3].

Beyond policy, research has also shown that outreach services provided by libraries have a significant positive impact on the quality of life of older adults. These services not only enhance their access to information but also improve mental wellbeing by providing regular social contact and community engagement. In many Home Library Service practices, book delivery is combined with meaningful interpersonal interaction, forming a dual-function service model that contributes to healthy ageing and social inclusion [4].

The UK has a well-established tradition of providing Home Library Services, with roots dating back to the post-WWII era and have since become a common part of public library provision across the country [5]. By 2001 to 2002, over 123,000 users were benefiting from such services, a substantial increase from 43,807 in 1984 [6]. These figures demonstrate the growing demand for inclusive, home-based services and highlight the evolving role of libraries in supporting health, wellbeing, and social inclusion.

1.2. Research context

Lambeth is located in the south of London and is known as a diverse and multicultural borough. Its population includes a large number of older adults, a relatively high proportion of people with disabilities, low-income families, ethnic minorities, and migrant communities. Some of these groups face difficulties in accessing information, which brings extra challenges for public library services.

In this social context, the Home Library Visit Service run by Lambeth Libraries is particularly targeted and meaningful. The service delivers books, audiobooks, and other resources directly to those who cannot visit the library, such as older people living alone, disabled children, and their caregivers. It ensures that they continue to receive cultural and informational support even when they are physically separated from public spaces.

A work placement was completed at Lambeth Libraries, during which the placement participant accompanied a librarian on a home visit. The author observed how the librarian selected materials based on each user's preferences and how long-term reading relationships were built. Through this experience, the author deeply felt the social value of the service. It is not just an extension of book lending. It also builds emotional and cultural connections between the library and its users.

1.3. Rationale

Lambeth Libraries' Home Library Visit Service was selected as the focus of this case study due to its human-centred approach and inclusive service design. Research interest lies in its potential to be adapted across different social and cultural contexts.

Based on the author's education in library studies and practical experience in China, it was observed that institutionalised home visit services analogous to Lambeth's model are absent in Chinese public libraries. Although some libraries have recently introduced delivery or app-based reservation systems. For instance, Chengdu Library's "Reading at Home" initiative offers two-hour book delivery via a mobile app [7]. However, most of these services largely prioritise convenience rather than targeting vulnerable populations or fostering sustained relationships between librarians and users. Therefore, this service was chosen because of its human warmth and inclusive approach, and the study aims to explore how this model could be used in other contexts, as well as the challenges and opportunities it may involve.

2. Description of the service

2.1. Service overview

Lambeth Libraries' Home Library Service is a free home delivery service designed for residents who are unable to visit the library in person due to mobility issues. It aims to mitigate informational and cultural exclusion for vulnerable groups. The service covers people who are housebound due to age, chronic illness, physical disability, or caregiving responsibilities, as well as individuals who are temporarily immobilised by illness or injury. It also serves institutional users such as day centres, care homes, and shelters, with customised book collections delivered and updated quarterly based on need.

Library staff visit users every three weeks. Each user may borrow up to 20 items at a time, including printed books, audiobooks, DVDs, and jigsaw puzzles. For visually impaired users, large-print books and audiobooks on CD are also available to meet different reading preferences and needs. All aspects of the service are free, with no age restrictions or requirement to hold a library membership beforehand.

The service is currently operated by three experienced librarians, each assigned a fixed group of readers. There is no rotation system to maintain continuity and long-term relationships. Before an initial visit, librarians contact new users by phone to ascertain their reading interests, and any specific needs. If necessary, two librarians may visit together for safety. Each user has a paper "round book" where librarians record their preferences, health conditions, and special requests. These records are updated regularly. Librarians also check borrowing history in the Axiell system to follow changes in reading habits and give more personalised suggestions.

Lambeth Libraries cooperates with local health centres and community organisations for promotion. Leaflets are distributed to general-practice surgeries and care facilities. All Lambeth library branches display the leaflets at front desks, and librarians may suggest the service when they notice patrons struggling with travel or carrying materials. There is also a dedicated Home Library Service page on the Lambeth Libraries website, where users can apply online.

One of the home-visit librarians regarded this service as long-term "reading companionship". Many users view her as a friend not just a librarian. She shared that losing long-term elderly users is one of the most difficult parts of her work and visits to seriously ill children often bring a sense of helpless compassion. This made me realise that the service goes beyond book delivery, it also provides emotional support and social connection.

2.2. User feedback

User surveys for the Home Library Service are typically conducted only when requested by higher authorities, roughly once every five years. However, this frequency limits ongoing evaluation and data-driven improvements.

In a survey by Lambeth Council, 80% of respondents were female and over 80% were aged 65 or above. Many reported health issues such as limited mobility (55%), sensory impairments (34%), and chronic illnesses (40%) [8]. These figures indicate that the service mainly supports older adults facing multiple physical challenges.

Despite strong alignment with user needs, the survey also revealed limited public awareness of the service. Around 60% of users heard about it through friends or family, and roughly one-third through library staff. Very few discovered it via the library website, which suggests limited digital visibility.

Regarding service frequency, over 80% of users preferred monthly visits, while 12% favoured the current three-week cycle. Many also suggested that receiving a phone call before each delivery would make the service more predictable and user-friendly.

Overall satisfaction was high. Nearly 90% felt the service met their needs in terms of book selection and delivery timing. Users appreciated the librarians' professionalism and felt the chosen materials matched their interests.

3. Analysis: features and drawbacks

3.1. User feedback

3.1.1. Accessibility and inclusion

Lambeth Libraries' Home Library Visit Service extends library access to residents who are unable to visit in person due to health, mobility, or caregiving constraints. It is a practical example of information equity and inclusive service.

The service has no age restrictions, does not require users to be registered library members, and places no limits on borrowing frequency or item types. This flexibility demonstrates strong institutional support for vulnerable groups. In particular, the service provides accessible materials for visually impaired users, including large-print books, audiobooks, and CDs, reflecting a high level of accessibility awareness. As IFLA notes, "Library services should adapt to users' abilities, rather than expect users to adapt to library systems." Lambeth's approach is a clear example of institutional inclusivity in practice.

3.1.2. Emotional connection

Although the service is structured around book delivery, in practice it also plays a significant role in reducing loneliness and fostering social connection, especially among older adults. Librarians report that most users are elderly people living alone, with some being children with long-term disabilities who remain at home. Within this context, the service operates as a "reading plus companionship" model, gradually transforming a functional library-user relationship into a sustained personal connection.

Over time, librarians often develop close, almost friendship-like relationships with their users. One librarian shared that she greatly values the face-to-face interactions, seeing them not just as part of the delivery task, but as meaningful emotional exchanges. When a user passes away due to age or illness, the sudden end to that relationship can be deeply affecting. This shows that emotional connection within the service is mutual: while users receive care and comfort, librarians also invest emotionally, developing a strong sense of professional attachment.

3.2. Drawbacks and challenges

3.2.1. Resource demand and staffing pressure

Although the service reflects strong human-centred values in both design and delivery, its heavy reliance on staff presents challenges in terms of long-term sustainability. During the internship, the author learned that the service is currently managed by only three dedicated home visit librarians. This limited staffing may be insufficient if demand increases, potentially leading to higher workloads and a decline in service quality. However, due to the absence of publicly available data on total user numbers, it is difficult to assess the scale of this potential issue with certainty.

3.2.2. Low visibility and limited promotion

The visibility of the Home Library Service remains relatively low. While it is introduced on the Lambeth Libraries website, the information provided is brief and lacks clear instructions. Although promotional leaflets are available, their effectiveness may be limited, as the target audience often cannot visit library branches in person. During a recent staff meeting, one employee

commented that "home visit service needs to be publicised properly as fewer people are aware the service exists." This indicates that the lack of outreach is a known issue even within the library system.

The previous survey revealed that 60% of users heard about the service through word-of-mouth, 34% through library staff, and only 4% through printed leaflets. Almost no one found out about it via the library website [8]. This highlights it has very low digital visibility, especially problematic for older users who may struggle with web navigation.

3.2.3. Lack of formal structures

Although Lambeth's Home Library Service performs well in terms of consistency and user satisfaction, it still faces limitations in institutional support. These include the absence of a formal service policy, a lack of systematic user feedback mechanisms, and insufficient institutional support for staff emotional wellbeing.

Firstly, despite its long-standing operation and clearly defined procedures, the service does not currently have a publicly available policy document. In contrast, other libraries, such as Hanson Public Library in the U.S., provide publicly accessible policies with clearly outlining service eligibility, procedures, and staff responsibilities [9]. Without a formal policy in place, it may create risks related to user expectations, service boundaries, and staff protection.

In addition, user evaluation is not part of regular service practice. According to librarian, user surveys are conducted only when mandated by senior authorities, typically once every five years. This infrequent approach limits the service's ability to track changing in user needs and reduces opportunities for data collection and evidence-based improvement.

More importantly, staff support also remains informal and largely experience-based. The current team of three librarians maintains strong mutual trust and communication, offering peer support when challenges arise. For more serious concerns, they may seek support from management or use wellbeing services provided by Lambeth Council, such as bereavement groups, relaxation spaces, and leisure rooms. However, these resources are optional and not formally integrated into the service structure.

While this informal, experience-led model works well in a small stable team, it relies heavily on long-term staff continuity and shared experience. If personnel change or the team expands, the lack of structured support and training may lead to inconsistency in service delivery. Moreover, the emotional labour involved in the service, such as dealing with the death of long-term users or supporting those with serious illnesses, remains unrecognised within formal frameworks. Without structured interventions, staff may face emotional fatigue or empathy burnout over time.

4. Recommendations

Based on on-site observation, staff interviews, and literature review of the Home Library Service in Lambeth Libraries, this section proposes several recommendations. These suggestions aim to address issues such as the lack of institutional structures and emotional labour support. They are intended to improve services in Lambeth and offer a useful guidance for other regions, particularly in countries like China, where such services remain limited.

4.1. Develop a structured user feedback mechanism

At present, the service heavily on personalised interaction, with limited formal mechanisms for collecting user feedback. The current model is low-frequency and reactive, making it difficult to track evolving user needs and gather consistent data to guide service development.

It is recommended that the library could establish a more structured feedback system. This might include brief questionnaires, preference update cards, or quarterly satisfaction surveys, completed during book deliveries or collected by phone or email. Such a mechanism would enable more a more accurate, up-to-date understanding of users' changing needs, and also provide a solid evidence base for future service adjustments.

4.2. Strengthen emotional labour support for librarians

The Home Library Service works because librarians build stable and trusting bonds with the users. These connections involve both professional skill and real emotional effort. Staff often face hard moments, like the death of elderly users or the sudden end of long-term service relationships. Currently, emotional support is mainly provided through informal peer communication within the team.

Although Lambeth Council does offer general wellbeing services, these depend on self-referral and lack structured integration into library operations. It is suggested that more formalised support mechanisms should be introduced, such as regular peer support groups, basic training on emotional resilience and empathy, and space for structured self-reflection between delivery cycles. These measures could help prevent burnout risks and protect librarians' wellbeing in the long term.

4.3. Publish a formal service policy document

Although the service works pretty well in practice, the library has never published a formal service policy on the library's website or other platforms. This absence may reduce transparency and predictability for users, and staffs may be ambiguity in their responsibilities.

A straightforward policy document, similar to the Homebound Delivery Policy from Hanson Public Library, would be helpful [9]. It should clearly outline eligibility criteria, application procedures, borrowing rules, safety protocols, privacy protections, and emergency procedures. Publishing such a policy would make the service more professional, provide users with clear information, and support accountability and public trust.

4.4. Expand functions beyond book delivery

While book delivery remains the core of the service, user needs are becoming increasingly diverse. Some users, particularly older adults, may experience difficulties accessing digital resources. Therefore, offering digital support during home visits, such as help with using the library website or borrowing e-books, could make these services more accessible.

Besides, many long-term homebound users also face social isolation. To help address this, the library could explore small-scale, low-barrier activities that foster connection, like phone-based book chats or interest-based discussion groups, which would help users to engage with others.

Shifting from a purely delivery-based model to one that also includes digital guidance and social connection would deepen the service's impact. As the service grows in this direction, it could play an even stronger role in supporting users both practically and emotionally.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the Home Library Visit Service offered by Lambeth Libraries as an example of inclusive and human-centred public library practice. Through on-site observation, user feedback, and analysis, it reflected how the service meets the requirements of homebound users by providing both reading access and emotional support, particularly older adults and people with disabilities.

Beyond the Lambeth context, this case highlights the potential of home library services as a sustainable model for inclusive access to information, particularly in ageing societies. In regions like China, where such services are still developing, the Lambeth approach offers valuable insights into how public libraries can adapt to community needs in flexible, caring, and innovative ways. As public libraries adapt to changing social needs, the home library visit model deserves broader attention. Not just as a response to physical barriers, but as a meaningful form of outreach that brings care, culture, and a sense of dignity into people's lives.

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