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Postprint: A Study on Public Library Services for People with Dementia in England

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study examines dementia services in English public libraries to provide a reference for Chinese libraries in developing related services. [Method/Process] The research analyzes the social context of dementia services in English public libraries, selects libraries from 17 administrative regions as case studies, and investigates the current state of library dementia services through website surveys and email consultations. [Results/Conclusion] Library service resources encompass service environment and facilities, collection resources, and service personnel, offering lending services, patron activities, and promotional initiatives. Service characteristics include: embedding within regional collaborative networks and leveraging library strengths, developing action plans and integrating the health and well-being of people with dementia into library strategies, recruiting volunteers and providing professional training for most service staff, delivering services for people with dementia as well as their caregivers and family members, and utilizing diverse promotional tools while conducting themed activities on special occasions. Based on the findings, implications for Chinese libraries are proposed.

Full Text

Research on Dementia Services in England's Public Libraries

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Abstract: This study examines dementia services in England's public libraries to provide reference for Chinese libraries developing related services. The paper analyzes the social context of these services, selecting 17 administrative regional libraries as research subjects and employing website surveys and email consultations to investigate current service provision. The findings reveal that

service resources encompass service environments and facilities, information resources, and service personnel, while service delivery includes document lending, reader activities, and promotional outreach. Key characteristics include: embedding services within regional collaboration networks while leveraging library strengths; developing action plans that integrate dementia group health and wellbeing into library strategy; recruiting volunteers and providing professional training for most service staff; serving not only individuals with dementia but also their caregivers and family members; and utilizing diverse promotional tools while organizing themed activities during special observances. Based on these results, the paper offers implications for Chinese libraries.

Keywords: England; public library; dementia; group health; wellbeing

1. Introduction

Dementia, known by various names across regions including cognitive disorder or cognitive impairment, is referred to as such throughout this paper. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines dementia as a chronic or progressive syndrome involving more severe cognitive decline than normal aging, affecting memory, thinking, orientation, comprehension, calculation, learning, language, and judgment. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form, accounting for 60-70% of dementia cases. Approximately 50 million people worldwide live with dementia, with Western Europe having the highest number of patients, while China has the largest patient population globally, representing 25% of all cases.

Given the large patient population and the barriers they face when using libraries, dementia groups have attracted attention from library communities internationally and in the UK and US. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published *Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dementia* in 2007. The American Library Association (ALA) established an Alzheimer's and Dementia Interest Group to support librarians serving these populations through forum exchanges. The UK's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) created the Libraries Change Lives award, recognizing programs serving dementia groups as part of its commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) identifies dementia groups as a key service population, working to raise public awareness and help patients and caregivers understand the condition and how to live with it. In 2015, Wakefield Library became the UK's first dementia-friendly library after comprehensive renovation supported by the Alzheimer's Society. In recent years, English libraries have played an increasingly important role in dementia-friendly community building, providing comprehensive support through information resources, physical spaces, and service programs that significantly impact user health. A 2019 evaluation of reading therapy books for dementia users in English public libraries found that 92% of users reported improved health awareness, 75% identified

increased information sources, and 68% and 63% respectively found the books helpful for dementia care and coping with the condition.

Since 2019, Shanghai has piloted elderly cognitive impairment-friendly communities, advocating for the development of “Dementia Friends” and friendly institutions. In 2019, several Nanjing institutions planned to establish the Nanjing Care for Cognitive Impairment Association and launch cognitive impairment-friendly community projects. While dementia patients have gained attention from government and society in China, library services for this population remain overlooked. This study provides a comprehensive introduction and analysis of dementia services in English public libraries to inform Chinese libraries’ participation in cognitive impairment-friendly community building.

2. Social Background of Dementia Services in England’s Public Libraries

This study employed web-based surveys to analyze policy documents and research reports published on government and industry organization websites, identifying three key contextual factors: policy initiatives from the Department of Health and Social Care, dementia-friendly initiatives from Public Health England (PHE), and library participation in the Dementia Action Alliance (DAA).

2.1 Policy Support for Dementia Groups Between 2009 and 2015, the Department of Health and Social Care released three policy documents—*Living Well with Dementia*, *Prime Minister’s Challenge on Dementia*, and *Prime Minister’s Challenge on Dementia 2020*—gradually expanding services and support for patients and caregivers. Regional governments developed top-down dementia strategies emphasizing multi-party collaboration among community groups and institutions to create comprehensive service and support systems.

2.2 Dementia-Friendly Initiatives Since 2014, PHE has partnered with the Alzheimer’s Society to promote dementia-friendly communities, dementia-friendly organizations, and Dementia Friends. English public libraries, as important community cultural and arts institutions, have actively responded by participating in community dementia-friendly projects and developing into dementia-friendly libraries. They provide free training to residents to better understand and assist people with dementia, cultivating them as Dementia Friends.

2.3 Dementia Action Alliance Established in 2010 with Alzheimer’s Society support, the DAA had by 2020 attracted over 150 public library organizations among its members from 38 sectors including healthcare, hospitals, social care, entertainment, and arts. The DAA provides members with platforms to learn about dementia health and social care, facilitates collaboration among members and with patients and caregivers, showcases service cases across sectors, and promotes service strategies on its website. This favorable policy environment, combined with government initiatives and cross-sector alliances, has

enabled English public libraries to develop diverse service programs over the past decade.

3. Survey Design and Results

3.1 Sample and Methodology England's administrative structure comprises five types: 55 unitary authorities, 32 London boroughs, 36 metropolitan boroughs, 26 counties, and 192 district councils under counties. Except for district councils, the remaining four types manage libraries through local government agencies that publish service information on their websites. From these four library-managing administrative types, this study selected the top 50% by population (75 administrative units) as an initial sample. Following a systematic search process—starting from government homepages, then leisure/community or library/archives sections, and finally dementia-related modules—the study identified 15 administrative libraries with dementia-specific columns (named with terms like “dementia,” “memory,” or “reminiscence”). Additionally, Norfolk and Kent libraries, which have won Libraries Change Lives awards, were included for their exemplary services, bringing the total to 17 libraries surveyed.

Information was collected from these columns, supplemented by library news, social media posts, user manuals, and action plans. Email consultations were conducted with librarians responsible for dementia services in all 17 administrative regions. The study also referenced data from two reports—*Public Library Dementia Services* and *Stand by Me: Public Libraries Promoting Older People's Wellbeing*—to complement the web survey and email consultation data.

3.2 Survey Results The collected data were organized according to China's *Public Library Service Standards* and *Community Library Service Standards*, categorizing services into resources and delivery. Service resources include environment/facilities, information resources, and personnel, while service delivery comprises lending services, reader activities, and promotion. summarizes dementia services across the 17 English regional libraries, with columns - corresponding to: service environment and facilities, information resources, service personnel, lending services, reader activities, and promotional outreach.

4. Analysis of Dementia Services in England's Public Libraries

4.1 Service Resources

4.1.1 Service Environment and Facilities To create safe, accessible, and inclusive dementia-friendly libraries, English public libraries seek professional assistance, consult spatial guidelines, and incorporate feedback from dementia patients and caregivers to develop appropriate space renovation plans. For example, Hampshire Library participated in dementia-friendly training from Andover Mental Health Services to modify its space renovation plan, while West Cheshire

and Chester Libraries referenced DAA's dementia-friendly environmental criteria for new library design and consulted dementia patients and related groups about the plans.

Libraries carefully consider environmental factors affecting dementia groups to create welcoming spaces. Wakefield's dementia-friendly library serves as a model, presenting guidance reports at CILIP health and wellbeing conferences and being featured in IFLA blogs. The library addresses six spatial elements: color, signage, decoration, furniture, high-tech facilities, and space zoning. It uses recognizable colors like red instead of difficult-to-distinguish purples, greens, and blues, and employs color contrast to help differentiate spaces. Signage uses understandable symbols to help patients identify locations. Decorations avoid reflective surfaces, spots, and striped tablecloths that cause confusion. Furniture selections prioritize familiar, comfortable, and safe options like wooden furniture and recliners. Interactive, multi-sensory high-tech facilities are added, and functional areas for dementia service programs are established. West Cheshire and Chester Libraries also consider sound and lighting in new constructions: creating low-noise activity spaces, ensuring adequate natural light at entrances, and providing changing rooms and accessible toilets.

4.1.2 Information Resources Dementia patients, caregivers, and families need high-quality health information to understand the condition, acquire healthcare knowledge and skills, improve care quality, and enhance patients' lives. English public libraries provide print and electronic books on: (1) dementia information (causes, diagnosis, early intervention); (2) healthy living advice (exercise, mental health, prevention/delay techniques); (3) patient personal stories; and (4) care and support information (communication skills, creative activities, complementary therapies).

Long-term reading benefits dementia groups by enhancing memory, maintaining language skills, and providing enjoyment. However, they face multiple reading barriers including decreased comprehension, memory loss, attention deficits, and vision decline. Libraries provide various formats: (1) "Picture to Share" books, picture books, and historical scrapbooks that leverage stronger graphic memory; (2) reminiscence resources, music, games, films, and drama that stimulate cognition; (3) quick-read paperbacks with simple text for those with attention difficulties; (4) audiobooks for vision-impaired patients and those with aphasia; and (5) Braille and large-print books.

4.1.3 Service Personnel Public library staff participate in education and training to improve dementia understanding, learn to identify patients, and serve them and their caregivers effectively. Training is typically organized by professional bodies like the Alzheimer's Society or mental health services. Some trained staff become Dementia Friends advocates who train colleagues. For instance, Hampshire County Council commissioned Andover Mental Health Services to guide dementia-friendly community creation across the county, requiring

all frontline and support staff to complete Dementia Friends training and wear badges. Trained staff become advocates who train others.

With recent staff reductions, libraries increasingly rely on volunteers who play crucial roles in home delivery services and reader activities. Libraries also encourage volunteers to complete dementia awareness training to improve service awareness and develop communication skills.

4.2 Service Delivery

4.2.1 Document Lending Services To facilitate access, some libraries offer special borrowing cards for dementia groups and caregivers with extended loan periods and fine waivers. Surrey Libraries, for example, allows relatives, caregivers, and care home staff to apply for reminiscence collection cards (valid for 12 items, 6-week loans) through online booking, email, or in-person requests.

Dementia groups often live at home or in care/sheltered housing with limited mobility, while caregivers bear long-term responsibilities that may prevent library visits. Therefore, libraries provide home delivery services, typically by vetted and trained volunteers who independently select needed materials. Libraries also establish collection points near patients' residences. Poole Libraries stores collections including print books and audiobooks in local care homes and sheltered housing, rotating materials every four weeks.

4.2.2 Reader Activities English public libraries provide five main activity types for dementia groups and caregivers:

- (1) **Leisure Activities:** Addressing symptoms like low mood, apathy, personality changes, social withdrawal, and language barriers, libraries offer entertainment (singing, film screenings), cognitive activities (puzzles, board games), creative pursuits (knitting, creative writing, crafts), and social events to eliminate isolation. Memory cafés are core services, regularly held in libraries or community centers, offering free social opportunities facilitated by trained volunteers who answer questions and organize activities with refreshments. Often called “morning coffee,” these gatherings provide crucial social support.
- (2) **Reading Groups:** Research shows reading activities help older adults exercise their brains, with group sharing providing additional benefits including improved mood, concentration, and memory. Libraries host reading groups for dementia patients, caregivers, and families, offering tea and refreshments in relaxed settings. Staff or volunteers lead discussions on pre-selected short stories and poetry, encouraging participants to share reflections.
- (3) **Reminiscence Groups:** Reminiscence therapy engages multiple senses to help patients recall past events, people, and places, alleviating boredom and depression while building confidence. Libraries regularly host themed

reminiscence sessions in relaxed atmospheres, using trained facilitators and specialized collections to stimulate memory and delay decline. Suffolk Libraries partnered with Sporting Memories Network to offer sports-themed reminiscence groups where sports ambassadors share stories and trained volunteers guide participants through viewing national and local sports photos and memorabilia.

- (4) **Digital Training:** Regular computer use can improve dementia patients' memory and thinking skills. Libraries provide computer and digital device training for patients and caregivers, helping build interest, confidence, and skills. Enfield Library offers free one-hour computer courses and assists with online forms like freedom pass applications.
- (5) **Health Education:** Libraries conduct ongoing health education activities to raise dementia awareness and improve care quality. These include Dementia Friends sessions, health drop-ins, themed lectures, and book exhibitions. Dementia Friends activities, organized with the Alzheimer's Society, use interactive methods to help participants understand dementia's impact and learn support techniques through one-hour sessions.

4.2.3 Promotional Outreach To increase service utilization, libraries post posters, distribute flyers, and share resources at conferences, forums, and partner outreach events. Kent and Norfolk libraries have won Libraries Change Lives awards, with staff sharing exemplary practices through interviews. Libraries also use digital tools: dedicated website columns, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and local news outlets. Hampshire and Norfolk libraries publish online dementia service manuals and reminiscence collection guides to raise community awareness and demonstrate commitment to dementia group wellbeing.

5. Characteristics of Dementia Services in England's Public Libraries

5.1 Embedded in Regional Collaboration Networks with Leveraged Library Strengths Operating at the administrative region level, England coordinates local dementia strategies that integrate public resources and build regional collaboration networks. Public libraries serve as network nodes, leveraging information and spatial resources to support dementia groups alongside health, cultural, charitable, commercial, and foundation partners. Norfolk's Wellbeing Board aims to improve dementia care, with surveys identifying libraries, transport, and government as key change agents. Norfolk Libraries partnered with Public Health to develop a dementia-friendly library strategy aligned with county dementia action plans. Funded by Public Health, the library purchased reading therapy books promoted by clinical commissioning groups to GPs and health professionals, as well as to Alzheimer's Society, Age UK, and community support groups. Libraries also provide activity spaces for dementia service partners to attract and support more users.

5.2 Action Plans Integrating Dementia Health and Wellbeing into Library Strategy Since 2010, many regional library systems and individual libraries have joined the DAA, which requires members to sign a national dementia declaration and develop action plans. These plans address libraries' roles in supporting dementia groups and caregivers while identifying service barriers and showcasing completed, ongoing, or planned projects. Action plans transform commitment into practice and drive innovation. Some libraries prioritize dementia support in strategic development, allocating resources to key projects. Doncaster Libraries' 2018-2021 strategy, for example, identified supporting people with dementia and mental health issues as a core mission, emphasizing development of reading therapy book programs to contribute to community health and social care.

5.3 Volunteer Recruitment and Professional Training for Service Staff English public libraries rely on volunteers who provide crucial support for service continuity and operations, particularly in home delivery and reader activities. Dementia patients have complex mental health needs, often feeling confused, agitated, or exhibiting repetitive behaviors, irritability, or anxiety. Service staff attitudes directly impact how patients and families experience library services. Therefore, staff and volunteers participate in professional training, such as the Alzheimer's Society's Dementia Friends program, which covers five key messages: dementia involves more than memory loss; people can live well with dementia; it's important to focus on the person, not the disease. This training builds empathy and equips staff with appropriate communication and support techniques. Some trained staff become advocates who train colleagues, creating a cascade of expertise.

5.4 Services for Dementia Groups, Caregivers, and Family Members Most dementia patients visit libraries accompanied by caregivers or family members. Beyond lending services and activities for patients, English public libraries address the health needs of caregivers, relatives, and health workers by providing targeted resources and activities. Suffolk Libraries offers dementia information, healthy living advice, and patient stories for those with dementia; care manuals for caregivers; practical guides for health professionals; and support books for family and friends. Regular Dementia Friends cafés and care consultation sessions serve both patients and caregivers.

5.5 Diverse Promotional Tools and Themed Activities During Special Observances Libraries combine online and offline promotional tools including flyers, posters, social media, and online news to reach target users. During Dementia Awareness Day and Action Week, libraries organize lectures, book exhibitions, memory cafés, morning coffee gatherings, and Dementia Friends activities, using social media to promote resources and services. This creates an atmosphere of dementia awareness while marketing library offerings.

6. Implications for Chinese Libraries

6.1 Attention to Dementia Groups and Related Populations Chinese public libraries provide personalized services for special groups including minors, older adults, and people with disabilities. With rising elderly populations, libraries increasingly offer accessibility features like wheelchairs, reading glasses, magnifiers, designated borrowing areas, and computer training. Dementia primarily affects older adults—a 2017 national mental health epidemiological survey found 5.56% prevalence among Chinese aged 65+. While early-stage patients show minimal behavioral differences from typical older adults, the disease progresses to cause memory loss, communication problems, behavioral changes, disorientation, and mobility difficulties. Most patients live at home or in care facilities with limited public services available.

English public libraries build upon general services to provide comprehensive, specialized support for multiple special groups including minors, older adults, visually impaired individuals, autistic people, and dementia patients. This study recommends that Chinese libraries, particularly those in communities with high elderly populations, adopt English models: develop themed collections addressing dementia patients' health information needs and caregivers' support needs, including picture books, music, games, and reminiscence kits; offer special borrowing cards with benefits and home delivery by trained staff; renovate spaces considering color, lighting, temperature, signage, and furniture; and conduct health education, leisure activities, and reading/reminiscence groups to combat stigma.

6.2 Participation in Cognitive Impairment-Friendly Community Building with Standards Compliance China is in the early stages of developing cognitive impairment-friendly communities, with Shanghai pioneering pilot programs that advocate for friendly institutions. As cultural institutions enriching older adults' lives, libraries should integrate into this movement, collaborating with communities to address dementia group and caregiver needs. Shanghai has released municipal and district guidelines like *Shanghai Elderly Cognitive Impairment-Friendly Community Construction Guidelines* and *Changning District Practice Guide*. Libraries should reference these guidelines to define their roles, identify target services and goals, and partner with relevant departments to develop library dementia action plans that coordinate with regional support initiatives.

6.3 Partnership Development for Complementary Advantages As public information resource centers serving all populations, libraries have information and spatial advantages but lack specialized knowledge and adequate resources for independent dementia service development. Partnerships enable resource complementarity. While Chinese libraries currently partner primarily with public health institutions for dementia education lectures and health screenings (e.g., Weihai Library's 2019 collaboration with a rehabilitation de-

partment), they should expand collaborations: partner with dementia-focused associations like the China Alzheimer's Association and China Cognitive Impairment MDT Alliance for professional guidance on collections, space design, and programming; connect with care centers, nursing homes, and hospitals serving dementia patients to understand information needs and attract users; and collaborate with street committees and community service centers to pool resources and secure support from government, charities, and foundations.

6.4 Volunteer Recruitment and Training for Staff and Volunteers A 2020 survey report on Chinese Alzheimer's patients' family conditions emphasized the urgency of improving social awareness and creating dignified living environments. Although dementia patients rarely visit libraries alone, service staff remain crucial. Staff awareness enables identification of dementia groups, recognition of special needs, and appropriate communication and support that creates a safe, welcoming environment. Currently, few Chinese public library staff possess dementia service knowledge and skills. Libraries can develop expertise through: (1) recruiting volunteers with medical, social care, or dementia service backgrounds or interest; and (2) regularly inviting professional organizations to conduct training on dementia basics, empathy, communication skills, behavioral management, and first aid, supplemented by educational materials like the Alzheimer's Society's dementia staging handbook to facilitate effective communication.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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