

# Why governments should prioritise the occupational therapist workforce

## Key points in this briefing

- Occupational therapists (OTs) help people overcome challenges when completing everyday tasks or activities.
- Occupational therapy is the solution to many of the UK's health and care needs. It can help get waiting lists down and relieve pressure on acute services by:
  - making services more personalised and focusing on prevention.
  - supporting people to be discharged from acute services.
  - preventing the health conditions getting worse.
- This can be achieved by embedding occupational therapy services into community settings, such as schools, community rehabilitation teams and GP surgeries.
- Occupational therapists help people with injuries, disabilities, illnesses, and long-term conditions remain in work for longer, and return to work after a period of absence.

## What do occupational therapists do?

An occupational therapist helps people of all ages overcome challenges completing everyday tasks or activities – what we call 'occupations'. An occupation is any activity that we need or want to do to live and to look after our physical and mental health, and our emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Occupations are essential to living. They give our lives meaning, purpose and structure. They help shape who we are, connect us with others and help create our identity and sense of belonging.

Occupational therapists look at relationships between your occupations, the challenges you face and your environment. And work with you to help achieve the breakthroughs you need to elevate your everyday life. This can give people a renewed sense of purpose. It can also open up new opportunities and change the way people feel about the future.

## Where we are today

We're spread too thinly – with around six occupational therapists for 10,000 people in the UK, based mainly in inpatient services. And only 3% of GP surgeries have occupational therapists in them.

We can't go on like this. The profession is in crisis, with high vacancy rates. For example, parts of the south-east of England and London report up to 40% vacancy rates and higher in some services. There are many reasons for this, including newly qualified occupational therapists not wanting to work in the NHS for more than two years.

In July 2024, 8,957 adults and 19,070 children and young people were waiting to see an occupational therapist in the community.

## Our vision for change

Our [Workforce Strategy](#) outlines why a focus on prevention and early intervention helps people remain in work, complete their day-to-day routines and carry out the occupations that are important to them. This approach will help people living with multiple health and care needs to manage their symptoms and reduce the need for hospital and specialist services and reduce dependency on care services.

Achieving our vision would reduce pressure on the NHS, GPs and other public health services, and help prevent people from reaching crisis point.

**Read more in our Workforce Strategy: [rcot.co.uk/workforce-strategy](https://rcot.co.uk/workforce-strategy)**

## Recommendations for the UK governments

**Work with us to achieve an expanded occupational therapy workforce positioned closer to communities. This is where they can have maximum impact in improving people's health and quality of life.**

**Together let's:**

1. **Ensure every school has access to an occupational therapist** to help children and young people with physical, learning and mental health difficulties fulfil their potential and prevent their needs from getting worse.
2. **Position occupational therapists in multi-disciplinary community rehabilitation teams**, reducing pressure on emergency health services and making it easier for people to manage long-term conditions themselves.
3. **Expand the number of occupational therapists in GP surgeries**, helping people get support sooner, without needing an admission to hospital, and reducing the chance of their condition getting worse. People should have access to OT assessments, advice and rehabilitation through their GP.

## Contact

We're RCOT, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We've championed the profession and the people behind it for over 90 years, and today, we are thriving with over 36,000 members. Then and now, we're here to help achieve life-changing breakthroughs for our members, for the people they support and for society.

For further information or to arrange a meeting please contact the Practice and Workforce team at [practice.workforce@rcot.co.uk](mailto:practice.workforce@rcot.co.uk)