

Building accessibility and inclusive design into housing practice: Link Group

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Context

Angela is a housing occupational therapist employed by Link Group, one of Scotland's largest social housing developers with approximately 15,000 properties across multiple local authorities. She manages the Inclusive Design Team, which was created in 2017 to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of Link's housing stock.

The challenge

Traditional housing design was often failing to anticipate the diverse needs of tenants, leading to costly retrofitting and adaptations when health conditions or disabilities arose.

Housing associations must balance immediate build costs with long-term adaptability, while also managing existing stock to meet changing tenant needs. Without specialised OT input, housing design may focus on minimum accessibility standards rather than truly inclusive environments.

The role

As Inclusive Design Manager at Link Group, Angela:

- Delivers and oversees the provision of Stage 3 Adaptations across Link Group's housing stock
- Takes a whole life-cycle approach to property design and adaptations
- Provides advice on designs for new-build developments to maximise inclusive design features
- Contributes to Link Group's Design Guide to promote inclusivity and 'design out' future adaptations
- Provides input to Link Group's planned maintenance programme to embed inclusive features in standard upgrades
- Advises housing officers on matching applicants with health and disability needs to suitable properties
- Offers technical expertise to external OTs working with Link Group tenants
- Has developed adaptation proformas to support detailed assessment and recommendations of client needs
- Delivers training on inclusive design to colleagues across the organisation

Benefits to the system

Housing benefits:

- Reduced need for costly retrospective adaptations through proactive inclusive design
- More efficient use of housing stock through better matching of properties to tenant needs
- Improved specifications for standard maintenance that benefit all residents
- Better informed design decisions for new developments
- Enhanced technical knowledge across the organisation about inclusive design

Health/social care benefits:

- Decreased demand on adaptation budgets through proactive design
- Reduced need for care packages in appropriately designed environments

- Prevention of health deterioration through supportive housing design
- Better alignment between health needs and housing provision
- Improved technical guidance for health and social care OTs

Benefits to individuals and families

- Increased ability to remain in homes as needs change
- Greater independence through environments designed for diverse abilities
- Reduced waiting times for essential adaptations
- Improved dignity and reduced stigma through mainstream inclusive design rather than specialist adaptations
- Better housing options for those with health conditions and disabilities

Developing the role: a practical guide

Setting up the role

- Position the OT to facilitate direct input to design processes for adaptations, new build and planned maintenance programmes
- Create clear pathways for influence on adaptations, new build design and maintenance programmes
- Establish responsibility for managing the adaptations budget and process
- Develop expertise in building regulations, design standards, and construction

Building an effective service

- Influence local design guides to exceed minimum standards for accessibility
- Create training programmes to build inclusive design knowledge across the organisation
- Establish proactive approaches to planned maintenance with inclusivity as standard
- Develop assessment and recommendation/specification tools to support external OTs in specifying adaptations

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Balancing increased build costs with long-term savings
- **Solution:** Develop whole life-cycle cost analyses that demonstrate return on investment

- **Challenge:** Working across multiple local authorities with different approaches
- **Solution:** Standardise internal processes while maintaining flexibility to work with different external systems

- **Challenge:** Limited technical knowledge among OTs referring into the service
- **Solution:** Create an advice service as part of the service. Provide guidance and assessment tools to support accurate recommendations and specifications

Demonstrating impact

- Track reduction in adaptation costs over time for both new build properties and properties upgraded through the planned maintenance programme and adaptations service
- Monitor tenant satisfaction with inclusive design features
- Document case studies demonstrating improved tenant outcomes
- Collect comparative data on adaptation needs in standard versus inclusively designed properties

Top tips for managers

- Involve OTs from the earliest stages of new development planning
- Create formal feedback mechanisms from adaptation requests to design specifications

- Include inclusive design principles in all planned maintenance programmes
- Develop specialised technical knowledge through training and professional development
- Create guidance materials for external OTs to improve adaptation recommendations and specifications
- Use existing tenant adaptations data to inform future design priorities
- Implement processes to capture the costs and benefits of inclusive design approaches