

# New build and design input: Nottinghamshire County Council

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## Context

Nottinghamshire County Council operates as a two-tier authority serving seven district councils, transitioning to two unitary authorities by 2028. The Adult Social Care Strategic Commissioning team identified that Nottinghamshire had disproportionately high use of residential care, primarily because appropriate supported accommodation environments didn't exist to meet people's needs.

The commissioning team works with housing developers to procure and design new supported accommodation for working-age adults with complex needs, including those transitioning from children's services residential placements and forensic mental health hospitals.

## The challenge

Multiple interconnected problems existed.

### Inappropriate residential care placements:

- People placed in residential care not because of care needs, but because appropriate housing environments didn't exist
- Young people transitioning from children's services residential settings had no supported living alternatives
- People transitioning from forensic mental health hospitals faced very slow community reintegration due to lack of suitable accommodation
- Individuals on waiting lists could not move forward due to environmental barriers

### Unsuitable existing stock:

- Older supported accommodation designed without specialist OT input had significant limitations
- One property had a long-term void because the bathroom design (separation between toilet and shower facilities) made it impossible to support someone to use those facilities
- Properties with narrow corridors, steps, and poor layouts severely limited who could be housed there
- Buildings offered late in development process with statements like 'no, you can't do ceiling track hoists'
- Incompatibility issues within properties reducing their utility

### Design failures in newer developments:

- Some new buildings had problematic design elements when designed without OT input
- Very narrow stairs leading to properties
- Steps down into properties
- Narrow layouts in places
- Poor lighting affecting wellbeing
- Properties marketed as accessible that were unsuitable for many people
- Lack of consideration for technology infrastructure (no internet signal in rural areas affecting assistive technology)

- Smoke alarm issues for people with visual impairments
- Structural inability to support ceiling track hoists

## The role

An occupational therapist works embedded within the Strategic Commissioning team (funded through adult care commissioning budget, not social care OT budget). Their responsibilities are:

- Pre-design needs assessment - Assessing current waiting lists and future need projections to determine what types of accommodation are required, where, and for which specific cohorts
- Developer engagement and education - Working directly with housing developers who approach the council with offers, providing OT input to ensure designs are usable and appropriate
- Evidence-based design specifications - Providing the evidence base to justify why particular design features are necessary when asking developers to invest additional money
- Person-centred design approach – Balancing strategic thinking with relating design back to individuals and cohorts of people who will live there
- Specialist needs expertise - Bringing deep understanding of sensory needs, neurodiversity, learning disabilities, mental health needs, and physical disabilities
- Wheelchair accessibility specification - Ensuring properties genuinely meet wheelchair user needs, not just tick accessibility boxes
- Ceiling track hoist planning - Identifying where hoists are needed and ensuring structural capacity is built in from the beginning
- Outdoor space accessibility - Ensuring external areas are accessible for all needs
- Technology infrastructure planning - Ensuring buildings can support assistive technology systems
- Targeted rather than generic design - Ensuring properties are designed for specific cohorts rather than everything being expensive 'one-size-fits-all'
- Community hub design - Working with people who will use spaces to design community facilities (drama clubs, language clubs, politics clubs, theatre groups, outdoor gardening spaces) that are genuinely accessible and usable
- Void prevention - Ensuring designs allow properties to be used by a wider range of people, preventing long-term voids
- Sensory environment design – Applying knowledge of sensory processing to consider soundproofing, lighting, wall décor, flooring patterns, mirror placement, noise levels, and window positioning

## Benefits to the system

### Housing benefits:

- Elimination of long-term voids in supported accommodation
- Properties that can be quickly filled when they become available
- Increased throughput, where appropriate, in well-designed services
- Reduced frustration for support staff and landlords
- Properties that can serve broader range of needs rather than being narrowly limited
- Prevention of costly retrofit requirements when properties are offered late in the day
- Learning for developers that benefits future projects beyond just the council's commissions

### Health/social care benefits:

- Reduction in inappropriate residential care placements - moving people from residential care into less restricted supported accommodation
- More timely hospital discharge - people can leave hospital more readily into appropriate environments
- Successful community transitions from forensic mental health settings

- Prevention of placement breakdowns due to environmental unsuitability
- Reduced reliance on expensive care packages to compensate for poor housing
- Better integration of people into local areas rather than having to move across the county to find suitable accommodation

#### **Financial impact:**

- Cost savings from residential care to supported living transitions (residential care is significantly more expensive than supported living)
- Void cost reduction (properties sitting empty cost money while generating no value)
- Prevention of retrofit adaptation costs when design is right from the start
- More efficient use of capital investment in new accommodation

#### **Benefits to individuals and families**

- People living in less restricted environments that better meet their needs
- Ability to remain in or move to local areas rather than relocating far from family and community
- Environments designed for thriving, not just surviving
- Access to community spaces and activities that people want to engage in, at times and locations that suit them
- Enriched lives through appropriate environmental design
- Independence and dignity through spaces that work for individual needs
- Integration and ability to interact with peers in accessible environments
- Reduced sensory overwhelm through thoughtful design (soundproofing, appropriate lighting, flooring that doesn't trigger visual disturbance)
- Ability to use entire buildings, not just adapted sections

#### **Developing the role: a practical guide**

##### **Setting up the role**

- Position the OT within strategic commissioning team, not operational social care OT services - this signals the strategic nature of the work
- Fund through commissioning budget to emphasise this is about strategic investment, not clinical service delivery
- Establish the role before accommodation crisis points - proactive rather than reactive
- Build relationships with housing developers, planning teams, and district/borough housing departments
- Create clear referral/consultation pathways so commissioners know when to involve OT
- Identify the specific cohorts requiring accommodation (transitions from children's services, forensic mental health, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, etc.)
- Conduct needs assessment to understand current waiting lists and future demand projections
- Secure commitment from senior leadership that this is a strategic priority

##### **Building partnerships between OTs and commissioners**

- Establish regular communication between OT and commissioning team
- Involve OT from the earliest stages when developers make offers - not late in the day
- Create templates or checklists for common accommodation types and needs
- Develop evidence base documents that commissioners can use when negotiating with developers
- Build shared language - help OT understand commissioning priorities, help commissioners understand OT value
- Set up joint site visits to proposed developments

- Create feedback loops so OT learns what happens after their input

### Essential skills and knowledge for the role

#### Clinical OT skills:

- Deep understanding of sensory integration theory (some team members completed post-graduate modules funded by Elizabeth Casson Trust, one pursuing PhD in sensory integration)
- Expertise in how sensory environments trigger or don't trigger behaviours
- Understanding of learning disabilities, neurodiversity, mental health needs, physical disabilities
- Knowledge of moving and handling requirements and ceiling track hoist specifications
- Assessment skills for both individual and cohort-level needs

#### Housing and construction knowledge:

- Ability to read architectural plans
- Understanding of building structures and what's possible/impossible to retrofit
- Knowledge of building regulations and accessibility standards (but going beyond minimum compliance)
- Understanding of how different building materials and finishes affect people (flooring patterns, lighting, soundproofing)

#### Strategic and communication skills:

- Ability to articulate evidence base to justify design specifications to developers
- Skill in balancing person-centred thinking with strategic and operational planning
- Confidence to constructively challenge developers and commissioners
- Ability to think at population/cohort level while maintaining individual focus
- Understanding of commissioning processes and language
- Capacity to educate developers in ways that benefit future projects

### Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Developers approaching council late in design process saying 'this can't be changed now'.
- **Solution:** Establish protocols that OT input is required at pre-planning stage. Build relationships with developers so they proactively involve OT early. Use examples of costly voids from late input to demonstrate business case for early involvement. Work with planning departments to make OT sign-off part of approval process for supported accommodation.
- **Challenge:** Commissioners and developers thinking OT input means expensive 'disabled bathroom with grab rails'.
- **Solution:** Educate about the breadth of OT expertise - sensory environments, lighting, flooring, acoustics, spatial layouts, community spaces. Use case studies showing how thoughtful design prevents voids and enriches lives. Emphasise that OT input often saves money by getting design right first time. Share feedback from developers about learning value.
- **Challenge:** OT feeling isolated as sole clinical voice in commissioning/housing environment.
- **Solution:** Build connections with other housing OTs regionally and nationally for peer support. Ensure line management understands the unique nature of the role. Create opportunities to present successes to build credibility. Connect with principal OTs and regional leads for professional development support.
- **Challenge:** Demonstrating value when working upstream (preventing problems rather than solving crises).

- **Solution:** Document examples of properties with/without OT input and their outcomes (void rates, suitability, user satisfaction). Track number of developments influenced and estimated cost avoidance from preventing retrofits. Collect quotes from commissioners about impact. Build case studies showing enriched lives.
- **Challenge:** Working across multiple district councils with different approaches in two-tier authority.
- **Solution:** Use upcoming unitary transition as opportunity to harmonise approaches. Start with 'early adopters' who are receptive and demonstrate success. Build relationships incrementally. Recognise some doors will stay closed initially - focus energy where there's willingness.
- **Challenge:** Balancing specialist knowledge without making everything expensive and bespoke.
- **Solution:** Think strategically about cohort needs rather than individual customisation. Identify core features that work for multiple need types. Design for adaptability rather than trying to meet every possible need from day one. Help developers understand targeted design for specific groups rather than generic 'accessibility.'

### Demonstrating impact

- Track void reduction in properties designed with OT input vs. those without
- Monitor time to fill properties - compare services with/without OT design involvement
- Document number of people moved from residential care to supported living in appropriate environments
- Calculate cost savings: residential care vs. supported living costs × number of people transitioned
- Record number of developments reviewed and developer offers assessed
- Collect feedback from developers about learning and application to future projects
- Document examples of design problems prevented (ceiling track hoists, technology infrastructure, sensory environments)
- Gather quotes from commissioners, support staff, landlords about impact
- Most importantly: capture stories from individuals about how appropriate environments have enriched their lives

### Top Tips for Managers

- Fund this role through commissioning, not social care OT budgets - signals strategic importance
- Position OT as embedded member of commissioning team, not external consultant
- Ensure OT has direct access to developer conversations from earliest stages
- Support OT to develop strategic thinking and commissioning knowledge - this isn't traditional clinical OT
- Provide opportunities for specialist training (e.g., sensory approaches, complex needs)
- Create protected time for site visits, plan reviews, and developer meetings
- Build in professional supervision from someone who understands both OT and strategic housing roles
- Connect OT with regional networks and principal OT leads for peer support
- Celebrate and publicise successes to build credibility with sceptical stakeholders
- Recognise that upstream work (prevention) is harder to measure than downstream (crisis response) - support OT to capture impact creatively
- Emphasise the necessity and value of OT input when writing business cases and reports
- Consider how role might evolve as organisation transitions to unitary authority - opportunity to expand influence